The Underground Railroad

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF COLSON WHITEHEAD

Colson Whitehead was born and raised in Manhattan. He attended Trinity School and Harvard University, graduating in 1991. He then moved back to New York and began working as a reporter for *The Village Voice* while simultaneously working on his first novel, *The Intuitionist*, which was published in 1999. Whitehead has now published six novels, of which *The Underground Railroad* is the most recent. Although well-known as a humorist, Whitehead's writing bridges several distinct literary genres including science fiction. In addition to novels, he has published numerous essays and two nonfiction books. He has won many awards, including the National Book Award (for *The Underground Railroad*), a Whiting Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a MacArthur Fellowship. He lives in Brooklyn.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The novel takes inspiration from the real-life underground railroad, a system of networks, safe houses, and "station agents," used to convey runaway slaves to the north. While the underground railroad was mostly not a literal train network (as it is depicted in the novel), there is evidence of some physical railroad infrastructure being used in order to transport runaways to freedom. The novel also makes use of several other key pieces of American history, although not necessarily in a historically accurate way. In 1850, the year in which the novel is set, the Fugitive Slave Law was passed as part of the Compromise of 1850 between northern "free" states and southern slave-owning states. This law stated that northern states had to cooperate with the capture and return of runaways to the South, and it was viciously opposed by abolitionists. One of its critics was Harriet Tubman, a formerly enslaved woman who escaped before assisting many others. Tubman is probably the most famous leader of the underground railroad. In the chapter set in South Carolina, black dormitory residents who are "owned by the government" are secretly subjected to forced sterilization and are the unknowing subjects of a study in the progression of syphilis. This part of the narrative is based on several examples of forced sterilization of black people that began during slavery and continue into the present, and the Tuskegee syphilis experiment of 1932-1972, during which hundreds of African-American men were given free food, lodging, and health care, yet were not told that they were being studied and purposefully denied treatment for syphilis. The experiment became the basis for reform of ethical standards in medical research, including laws mandating informed consent. The chapter in North Carolina, meanwhile, which features the mythic "Freedom Trail," was inspired by the mass lynching that began in the early 19th century and reached a peak between the late 1880s and 1930s. The free black community at Valentine farm and the chapter about "body snatching" also take inspiration from real parts of American history.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Underground Railroad is an example of a neo-slave narrative, a term coined by Ishmael Reed that refers to a work of literature written in the contemporary era that is set during the slavery era and tells the story from the perspective of enslaved characters. Other examples of neo-slave narratives include Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women*, and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*. These works of literature honor the original tradition of slave narratives, the most famous examples of which are Harriet Ann Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Olaudah Equiano's *The Life of Olaudah Equiano*, Solomon Northup's *12 Years a Slave*, and Frederick Douglass' *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Underground Railroad*
- **When Written:** 2011-2016
- **Where Written:** New York, USA
- **When Published:** 2016
- **Literary Period:** 21st century African-American historical fiction
- **Genre:** Neo-slave narrative
- **Setting:** Several states in America in the year 1850, including Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Indiana
- **Climax:** When Elijah Lander delivers his speech and it is interrupted by a white gang who destroy Valentine farm
- **Antagonist:** Arnold Ridgeway
- **Point of View:** Third-person narrator

EXTRA CREDIT

Coming to the small screen. In March 2017 Amazon announced the production of a mini-series based on *The Underground Railroad*, directed by Oscar-winning director Barry Jenkins.

Real pieces of history. The first four runaway slave ads featured in the novel are taken word-for-word from real 19th century newspapers. The only one that Whitehead wrote

himself is the last one, Cora's.

PLOT SUMMARY

The protagonist Cora's grandmother, Ajarry, is kidnapped from Africa as a child and brought to America, where she is sold many times before ending up on Randall plantation. Ajarry has three husbands and five children, and the only one of the children that survives is Mabel, Cora's mother. Ajarry dies of a brain hemorrhage while working in the cotton field.

The narrative jumps to Cora's adolescence—she is still living on Randall. Cora spends every Sunday tending to her garden, which she inherited from Mabel (who inherited it from Ajarry). After Mabel ran away, Cora became a "stray" and was placed in Hob, the cabin for "wretched" women. Soon after Cora was placed there, she had a confrontation with a man named Blake who built a wooden house for his dog in Cora's garden. Cora destroyed the doghouse with a hatchet and cut off the dog's tail. Soon after, she was gang-raped by four enslaved men.

One day, the enslaved population on Randall is preparing a birthday feast for Jockey, an enslaved man who picks random days on which to celebrate his birthday. Before the feast, Cora talks to her friend Lovey, a kind and simple young woman who—unlike Cora—enjoys dancing. Just before the feast, a young man named Caesar pulls Cora aside and asks her to run away with him, an idea Cora dismisses as ludicrous. After the feast, the slaves dance and play music, but they're interrupted by James and Terrance Randall, the brothers who own the plantation. The brothers force the slaves to dance for their entertainment and Terrance grows furious when a young boy, Chester, accidentally knocks wine onto Terrance's shirt. As Terrance is about to hit Chester, Cora defends him, and both of them are brutally whipped as a result.

Soon after Jockey's feast, James Randall dies of kidney failure, which means that Terrance (the crueler brother) takes over the whole plantation. This causes a man named Big Anthony to run away, though Big Anthony is soon captured and tortured to death over a gruesome three-day period. After this, Cora agrees to run away with Caesar; he tells her that he is being assisted by Fletcher, a local shopkeeper who works for the underground railroad. The two set off in the night, and they soon realize that they are being followed by Lovey. They do not get far from the plantation before running into hog farmers who manage to capture Lovey. Cora is tackled by a young boy and she kills him with a rock. After Cora and Caesar find Fletcher, Fletcher introduces them to Lumbly, who houses an underground railroad station beneath his farm. They travel in a rickety car to South Carolina.

When Mabel disappeared, she gave no indication to Cora that she was leaving. Old Randall hired Ridgeway, a notorious slave catcher, to find Mabel, but he was unable to do so. Ridgeway is the son of a blacksmith, Ridgeway Sr. who believed in a "Great Spirit" uniting all living things. As a teenager, Ridgeway becomes a patroller, terrorizing and abusing black people, before deciding to become a professional slave catcher. Ridgeway is tortured by his failure to capture Mabel and he swears he will track down Cora in her place.

Mr. and Mrs. Anderson are a couple living in South Carolina with their two children, who are cared for by a black nanny called Bessie. Bessie sometimes takes the children to visit their father at his office in the Griffin Building, a 12-story building with an elevator. Bessie lives in dormitories supervised by white proctors, including Miss Lucy. It is eventually revealed that Bessie is, in fact, Cora, who (along with Caesar) assumed a fake identity in South Carolina with the assistance of a white saloon owner and underground railroad agent named Sam. Cora takes classes in literacy with Miss Handler, and she undergoes medical examinations at the local hospital. One night, there is a dormitory social at which Cora wears a pretty new dress and chats happily with Caesar. Although there is an underground railroad train coming in a few days, they decide to stay in South Carolina. Later that night, Cora sees a black woman running through the green in front of the dormitories screaming, "They're taking away my babies!" This image haunts Cora.

Soon, Cora is given a new job as a "type" in a museum. She poses in three different scenes representing different stages in the transatlantic slave trade: "Scenes from Darkest Africa," "Life on the Slave Ship," and "Typical Day on the Plantation." At her next medical examination, Dr. Stevens suggests that Cora undergo sterilization, which horrifies her. Soon after, Sam informs her and Caesar that there are rumors that the doctors are not treating some of the black dormitory residents for syphilis so that the doctors can study the infection's progression. Meanwhile, other residents are being forcibly sterilized in order to cull the black population. Shortly after, Cora has an interaction with Miss Lucy that causes her to fear that her true identity as a runaway slave may have been revealed. She goes to warn Sam, who tells Cora that Ridgeway is after her and hides her down on the underground railroad platform. After waiting in the dark, Cora realizes that on the other side of the door Sam's house is on fire.

Cora is brought to North Carolina by a teenage engineer on the underground railroad. Once there, Martin Wells discovers her on the platform and he is alarmed by her arrival, as the station is supposed to be closed. Martin shows Cora the Freedom Trail, a seemingly endless line of lynched black bodies left hanging on display, and he explains that black people are not allowed in North Carolina anymore. Martin lives with his wife, Ethel, and they hide Cora in their attic. They have a servant, Fiona, a young Irish woman who cannot know about Cora's presence, lest she alert others and get Cora, Martin, and Ethel killed. Through a crack in the attic wall, Cora watches the Friday

Festival, an event at which the local townspeople watch a minstrel show and then publically lynch a black person. The heat in the attic is so intense that Cora sometimes passes out, and she is given only very small amounts of water and food. She eventually gets sick, and Ethel cares for her, which marks a shift from Ethel's previously hostile attitude. Soon after, patrollers arrive at the house and storm straight up to the attic. Among them is Ridgeway, who grabs Cora by the ankles and throws her down the stairs. Ridgeway takes Cora with him. As they drive away Martin and Ethel are stoned to death by the townspeople.

Cora travels through Tennessee with Ridgeway, Ridgeway's accomplices Homer and Boseman, and a captured runaway, Jasper, who won't stop singing hymns. Homer is a 10-year-old black boy who serves as Ridgeway's driver and bookkeeper. Although he is technically free, Homer mysteriously decides to stay with Ridgeway and he even voluntarily chains himself to Ridgeway's wagon at night. Boseman, meanwhile, has been traveling with Ridgeway for three years and he wears a necklace of shriveled ears. Ridgeway eventually gets irritated by Jasper's singing and shoots him. They travel through towns struck by wildfires and yellow fever. One evening, Ridgeway gives Cora a new dress to wear and takes her out for dinner. He informs Cora that Caesar was killed by a mob in South Carolina. After the dinner, Boseman attempts to rape Cora but is interrupted by Royal, Justin, and Red, three free black men who shoot Boseman and rescue Cora. Cora kicks Ridgway three times in the face before fleeing.

The narrative jumps into the future, with Cora now living on Valentine farm, a free black community in Indiana. She is once again taking classes, and she shares a cabin with a woman named Sybil and Sybil's daughter, Molly, with whom Cora has an affectionate bond. The farm is run by John Valentine, a white-passing freeborn black man, and his wife, Gloria. Visitors often come to the farm, including abolitionists, musicians, and poets. Cora, meanwhile, is being courted by Royal, who shows her a nearby underground railroad station. Cora spends most of her time in the farm's library, and one day John joins her there to discuss the future of the farm. The residents are about to debate whether the community should move west or stay put and expel the runaways who live there. John tells Cora that he feels a sense of duty to help all black people, who he believes must look out for one another.

The farm hosts a debate about the community's future at which all residents are present. One of the oldest residents, Mingo, gives a speech advocating the expulsion of runaways and "criminals" and arguing that the only way to achieve "Negro uplift" is through embracing only the "best" members of the race. Elijah Lander, a biracial abolitionist and rhetorician, gives the next speech. Lander argues that Valentine farm may be a "delusion," but it is a delusion that its residents must believe in. Just as Lander's speech is coming to an end, the meeting is disrupted by Ridgeway and a gang of white men. They shoot Lander and Royal and drag off many others. Royal dies in Cora's arms while telling her with a smile to escape via the underground railroad. Ridgeway captures Cora and demands that she lead him to the railroad station.

The penultimate chapter describes Mabel's life and her decision to run away. When Cora was born, Mabel was repeatedly raped by Moses, one of the black bosses on Randall. Cora had been born as a result of Mabel's romantic affair, at the age of fourteen, with Grayson, a kind and confident man who died of fever before learning that Mabel was pregnant. When Mabel runs away, she is thrilled by the taste of freedom but she immediately decides that she must go back for Cora. However, on her way back to Randall she is bitten by a snake and dies, her body swallowed up by the swamp.

Cora takes Ridgeway and Homer to the station. Just as they get to the stairs, though, Cora pulls her chains around Ridgway's neck, which causes him to fall down the stairs. As he lies dying from his injuries, Ridgeway asks that Homer write down his last words. Cora, meanwhile, steps onto the handcar waiting in the station and begins slowly conveying herself to freedom, swinging at the tunnel with a pickax as she goes. After a while she grows too tired and, in between sleeps, continues her journey on foot. Eventually, she reaches the mouth of the tunnel and she can tell from the sun that she has made it north. She encounters a group of wagon drivers and sits up with an elderly black man named Ollie, who offers her food and water and suggests that they catch up on each other's stories.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Cora (aka Bessie) – Cora is the heroine of *The Underground Railroad*. She was born on Randall plantation in Georgia to her mother Mabel, and she never knew her father, Grayson, who died before she was born. Her grandmother, Ajarry, was born in Africa before being kidnapped and brought to America. Cora is brave and rebellious; the narrator suggests she inherited her capacity to endure obstacles and brutality from Ajarry, and her stubborn instinct for resistance from Mabel. Even so, Cora at first finds the prospect of running away with Caesar ludicrous. It is only once she has tasted freedom for herself—and overcome numerous near-escapes in which her friends such as Caesar and Lovey are captured and killed—that Cora becomes fearlessly dedicated to the pursuit of a free life in the north. While living in South Carolina, Cora assumes the fake identity of a woman named Bessie Carpenter in order to avoid being recognized as a runaway and wanted murderer. Toward the end of the book, in Indiana, she has a romantic affair with Royal, which is prematurely ended when Royal is killed by Ridgeway. Cora's fate is never determined, but the book ends on an optimistic note, with Ollie offering her food as she joins him on

the road to the north.

Caesar – Caesar is an enslaved man who lives on Randall and invites Cora to run away with him. Born in Virginia to Lily Jane and Jerome, Caesar spends most of his life in Virginia (owned by Mrs. Garner), before being sold south and ending up on Randall. In South Carolina, Caesar enjoys his work in a factory and happily decides to stay there with Cora. However, when Ridgeway discovers Caesar and Cora are in disguise there, Caesar is imprisoned and then killed by a mob that enters his prison cell and tears his body to pieces.

Ajarry – Ajarry is Cora's grandmother and Mabel's mother. She was born in Africa before being kidnapped and enslaved slave in America, where she is sold so many times that she comes to believe she is "cursed." She has three husbands and five children, of which Mabel is the only one to survive. She is well-liked and respected on Randall, and this respect helps protect Mabel and Cora within the enslaved community until Ajarry's death. She is the first owner of the garden, and she dies on Randall after suffering a brain hemorrhage while working in the field.

Mabel – Mabel is Ajarry's daughter and Cora's mother. When she is 14, she has a brief romance with Grayson, through which she becomes pregnant with Cora. However, after Grayson dies of a fever before Cora is born, Mabel never mentions his name again. Mabel spends her entire life on Randall before one day running away, leaving Cora behind. Cora resents her mother for what she perceives as this act of selfishness, and is furious that Mabel didn't say goodbye. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that Mabel did in fact say her own kind of goodbye to Cora, and also that not long after fleeing the plantation, she decided to come back for Cora. However, she only made it a few miles before dying from a snake bite.

Lovey – Lovey is an enslaved woman living on Randall. She is the daughter of Jeer and a friend of Cora. She is kind and childlike and enjoys dancing at the celebrations on Randall. She secretly decides to join Cora and Caesar's escape mission but she is captured early in the journey by hog hunters who return her to Randall, where she is killed by being impaled by a metal spike, her body left on display to discourage others who think of trying to escape.

Terrance Randall – Terrance is one of the two Randall brothers, each of whom controls half of Randall plantation. Terrance is far more sadistic than his brother, James, choosing to frequently torture and sexually abuse enslaved people. After James dies, Terrance takes over both halves of the plantation. Months after Cora escapes from Randall, Terrance dies of heart failure in a New Orleans brothel. The narrator implies that Terrance's frustration over his inability to capture Cora was a significant factor that led to his death.

James Randall – James is Terrance's brother and one of Old Randall's two sons. He controls the half of the plantation on which Cora lives, and he is a distant, uninvolved master. There are rumors that he has a preference for sexual masochism and pays prostitutes to whip him in New Orleans. He dies of kidney failure while Cora is still living on Randall.

Old Randall – Old Randall is the father of James and Terrance and the former owner of Randall plantation. He was more popular within the local white community than either of his sons, who Ridgeway believes were corrupted by being born to so much money. He is already dead by the time most of the novel's action takes place.

Chester – Chester is a young boy who lives on Randall. Cora takes a liking to him because, like her, he is a "stray" (an orphan). When Terrance forces the enslaved population to dance, Chester accidentally knocks Terrance's wine onto his shirt, causing both Chester (and Cora, who defends him) to be brutally whipped. After this point, Chester never speaks to Cora again.

Arnold Ridgeway – Ridgeway is the son a blacksmith, Ridgeway Sr., who grows up to become a notorious slave catcher. He has a fearsome reputation as a slave catcher, but is also known for his strange personality. He is a fervent believer in "manifest destiny," the idea that white people have a right (and even a duty) to colonize America and enslave black people in order to construct the country. Ridgway is more honest about the reality of America than many other white characters in the novel, refusing to uphold myths about the country and its history. He is obsessed by his failure to capture Mabel and Cora, and he ends up being killed by Cora in Indiana in a final physical battle that resembles a dance.

Sam – Sam is a station agent who owns a saloon in South Carolina. He helps to arrange Cora and Caesar's new identities and placement in the dormitories. He is kind and dedicated to his work for the underground railroad, although he possesses a faith in the racial progressiveness of South Carolina that turns out to be fatally naïve. His house is burned to the ground, but Sam survives and comes to visit Cora in Indiana, where he attempts (and fails) to seduce Georgina.

Miss Lucy – Miss Lucy is one of the proctors in South Carolina. She has a "severe aspect," but Cora comes to like her—that is, until Cora discovers the true purpose of the medical "treatment" that the dormitory residents receive. Miss Lucy herself claims to be committed to supporting black people, however she is all-too-happy to comply with Fugitive Slave Laws that dictate that she must hand over any black dormitory residents who are found to be runaways. Furthermore, she puts pressure on Cora to become sterilized, saying only through doing this would Cora be a "credit to [her] race."

Mr. Field – Mr. Field is the "Curator of Living History" at the museum in South Carolina, where he employs Cora, Isis, and Betty as "types." He is a relatively fair and kind employer, however he misunderstands Cora's protests that the scenes in

which she poses inaccurately represent the truth of what slavery is like. This misunderstanding highlights the fact that Mr. Field believes in whitewashed myths about the treatment of enslaved people, even when the brutal reality is all around him.

Dr. Aloysius Stevens – Dr. Stevens is another doctor who examines Cora. Prior to his employment in South Carolina, he was a medical student in Boston, where he was involved with the "body trade" of stealing corpses for research. During this time, Stevens felt out-of-place among medical students due to his poor Irish background. He condemns racism and even feels a sense of affinity with black people, although he never admits this out loud and becomes complicit with the commodification and exploitation of black people that takes place through the medical industry.

Martin Wells – Martin Wells is a station agent for the underground railroad in North Carolina. He became involved with anti-slavery efforts through his father, Donald. He is married to Ethel and harbors Cora in his attic. Although Martin is kind to Cora and helps her even after his railroad station was supposed to have closed, he is timid and reluctant to transport Cora to the next station. He is stoned to death by his fellow townspeople after Cora is discovered.

Ethel Wells (née Delany) – Ethel Wells is Martin's wife and the mother of their daughter. As a child, she was best friends with an enslaved girl, Jasmine, and dreamed of becoming a missionary. There are hints that she is a lesbian, and she finds her marriage to Martin miserable. At first she treats Cora in a rude and hostile way, however when Cora becomes sick she takes on a more caring attitude, delighted by the chance to live out her religious and romantic fantasies on the incapacitated Cora. She is stoned to death alongside her husband after Cora is discovered.

Fiona – Fiona is a young Irish woman who is employed as a servant by Martin and Ethel. She exposes the fact that her employers are hiding Cora in the attic, claiming that she has to look after her own interests in order to make it in America. However, she seems to excessively delight in the opportunity to snitch, shouting gleefully as Cora is pulled out the house.

Homer – Homer is a young black boy who is part of Ridgeway's gang. Ridgeway purchased him for $5 before buying his freedom, but Homer still chooses to stay with Ridgeway and even voluntarily chains himself to Ridgeway's wagon at night. Cora is baffled by Homer, who seems to feel no sense of solidarity with other black people and happily chooses to follow Ridgway around, watching him capture, brutalize, and murder runaways. As Ridgway's book-keeper, Homer maintains meticulous notes on Ridgway's profits and losses, and seems to have been brainwashed into viewing life in purely economic terms.

Boseman – Boseman is an accomplice of Ridgeway's. He wears a necklace of shriveled ears, which he won from a Native American man in a wrestling contest. He is described as unintelligent and is more naïve and sentimental than Ridgway. Boseman is fatally shot by Royal after being caught attempting to rape Cora.

John Valentine – John is the owner of Valentine farm and the husband of Gloria. He is light-skinned and passes for white, although he does not hide the fact that he is black among other black people. After escaping the south with his family, John dedicates his life to helping other black people, telling Cora: "White man ain't going to do it. We have to do it ourselves." After his farm is destroyed, John and his family resettle in Oklahoma.

Gloria Valentine – Gloria is the wife of John, who secretly purchases her freedom before they wed, and the mother of their five children. She is an elegant woman who makes an effort to rid her speech of its "plantation inflections." She tells John that she wants to move to Oklahoma, and although he doesn't understand why he complies with her wishes after Valentine farm is destroyed.

Elijah Lander – Lander is a well-educated and distinguished biracial man who travels the country giving political speeches. Just before Valentine farm is destroyed, he gives an impassioned speech advocating racial solidarity and the pursuit of freedom. Unlike Mingo, Lander rejects the idea that black people should promote racial uplift by disassociating with those whom white society deems to be the weak links of the black community, such as runaways, drunks, and "criminals." Having finished his speech, he is fatally shot while still at the podium.

Royal – Royal is a freeborn black man who rescues Cora from Ridgeway. Royal has an optimistic personality, and is dedicated to the pursuit of freedom both for himself and all black people. He is attractive and captivating, and the narrator notes that may people are charmed by his "exotic" demeanor. He and Cora have a romantic affair, and Royal dreams of moving to Canada where they can start a family. He is fatally shot when Valentine farm is destroyed, and dies in Cora's arms. However, even in his final moments as the massacre of Valentine residents takes place around him, he smiles at Cora and tells her to escape via the underground railroad, saying: "You can tell me where it goes."

Connelly Connelly is the white overseer on Randall plantation. He is selfish and cruel, taking various enslaved women as his "mistresses." For a while, he has a preference for Nag and gives her special privileges; however, Connelly eventually rejects her and sends their children to live on the other half of the plantation so he doesn't have to see them. Connelly's brutality is also revealed when he beats Chester to death for not working fast enough and when he gouges out the eyes of a slave for merely looking at words.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jockey – Jockey is the oldest enslaved person living on Randall. He claims to be 101, although in reality he is only about 50. He regularly makes up birthdays for himself as an excuse to have a celebratory feast.

Blake – Blake is a large, strong, and intimidating enslaved man who lives on Randall. He decides to keep his dog in Cora's garden and he builds it an elaborate doghouse, which Cora destroys to protect her turf. He dies from an unspecified gruesome punishment after being caught running away.

Alice – Alice is an enslaved woman who is the cook on Randall plantation. She has high social standing within the enslaved population because she is a favorite of James Randall, who loves her food. She is prejudiced against Cora because Cora lives in Hob.

Moses – Moses is one of the black bosses on Randall. As a child, he was weak, yet after his mother was sold he becomes a quick and skilled laborer. He becomes cruel after being promoted to the position of boss, and regularly rapes Mabel before she runs away.

Michael – Michael is an enslaved boy who, before being bought by James Randall, was owned by a man who taught him to recite the Declaration of Independence. He is beaten to death by Connelly for being an inefficient worker.

Nag – Nag is an enslaved woman who used to be Connelly's favorite and spent most nights in his cabin. When Connelly loses interest in her, she is moved to Hob by other enslaved women who resented her formerly "privileged" position.

Big Anthony – Big Anthony is an enslaved man who runs away from Randall, only to be captured and returned in an iron cage. Terrance arranges for him to be tortured and killed over the course of a gruesome three-day ordeal.

Mrs. Garner – Mrs. Garner is the former owner of Caesar and his parents, Lily Jane and Jerome. She promises to free Caesar and his family upon her death, but she fails to stipulate this in her will, which leads Caesar and his family to be separated and sold south.

Fletcher – Fletcher is a shopkeeper from Pennsylvania who works for the underground railroad in Georgia. He conveys Cora and Caesar on the first leg of their journey to freedom. He is captured and presumably killed, although his exact fate is never specified.

Jeer – Jeer is Lovey's mother. She was born free in Africa before being captured and sold onto Randall. She inadvertently alerts the bosses on Randall to Lovey, Cora, and Caesar's disappearance.

Lumbly – Lumbly is a station agent for the underground railroad. Fletcher brings Cora and Caesar to the station, which is underneath Lumbly's farm.

Ridgeway Sr. – Ridgeway Sr. is Arnold Ridgeway's father. He is a blacksmith who has a peaceful, spiritual view of the world and disapproves of his son's decision to work as a slave catcher.

Mr. Anderson – Mr. Anderson employs Cora (while she is known as Bessie) to look after his children. He works on cotton contracts in the Griffin Building.

Mrs. Anderson – Mrs. Anderson is Mr. Anderson's wife and the mother of their two children. She suffers from a nervous disorder and works in fundraising for the new hospital.

Miss Handler – Miss Handler is Cora's teacher in South Carolina. She is patient and encouraging, although Cora leaves her classes feeling embarrassed of her ignorance.

Dr. Campbell – Dr. Campbell is the first doctor who examines Cora in South Carolina.

Isis – Isis is a young black woman who is employed in the museum alongside Cora and Betty as a "type."

Betty – Betty is the other young black woman employed in the museum with Isis and Cora.

Meg – Meg is a friend of Caesar's in South Carolina. Cora suspects that she and Caesar are dating.

Bertram – Bertram is a newly-employed doctor in South Carolina who frequents Sam's saloon and reveals that the residents are being denied treatment for syphilis when he is drunk.

Carpenter – Carpenter is a professional body snatcher in Boston who delivers bodies to Dr. Stevens.

Teenage engineer – The teenaged engineer is an unnamed person who conveys Cora from South Carolina to North Carolina on the underground railroad.

Judge Tennyson – Judge Tennyson is the local judge of the town in North Carolina. He is a drunk.

Jamison – Jamison is a senator in North Carolina who leads the town's "Friday Festivals" at which black people are lynched.

Richard – Richard is a teenage patroller in North Carolina who discovers Louisa hiding in the helm of a ship.

Louisa – Louisa is a young black woman who is discovered by Richard in North Carolina. She is brutalized and lynched.

Donald Wells – Donald Wells is Martin's father. Although he kept it a secret his whole life, Donald was an active abolitionist. Upon his death, he passed his position in the underground railroad to his son.

Jasmine – Jasmine is an enslaved black girl owned by Ethel's father, Edgar Delany. When they are young, she and Ethel are best friends, until Edgar forbids Ethel from playing with her. When she is 14, Edgar begins sexually abusing her, and Edgar's wife eventually arranges for her to be sold.

Felice – Felice is Jasmine's mother. She is an enslaved woman owned by Edgar Delany.

Edgar Delany – Edgar is Ethel's father. He is a vocal racist who bans Ethel from playing with Jasmine in order to maintain the hierarchy of the races, while at the same time sexually abusing Jasmine himself.

Lily Jane – Lily Jane is Caesar's mother and the wife of Jerome. She lives in Virginia until Mrs. Garner's death, when she is separated from her husband and son and sold south.

Jerome – Jerome is Lily Jane's husband and Caesar's father. He teaches Caesar that Caesar can be whatever he wants to be when he grows up; however, when Mrs. Garner dies, he is sold separately from his family.

Jasper – Jasper is an enslaved man who is captured by Ridgeway. Jasper sings hymns constantly, and Ridgway eventually shoots him in exasperation.

Nelson – Nelson is a runaway slave whom Ridgeway is charged with finding after Nelson's former master discovers that he is living openly as a trapper in Missouri.

Georgina – Georgina is a young black woman from Delaware who teaches Cora's class on Valentine. At first she and Cora don't get along, finding it difficult to make sense of one another. However, soon after they develop a close friendship.

Molly – Molly is a young black girl living on Valentine farm. She and her mother, Sybil, share a cabin with Cora. Molly and Sybil have a close, loving relationship that brings Cora joy to witness, even as it makes Cora sad about her own troubled relationship with Mabel.

Sybil – Sybil is a black woman who lives on Valentine with her daughter, Molly. She and Cora share a cabin and become close friends. Sybil is proud and opinionated, with an unnamed lover who makes her a rocking chair and a disdain for the praise heaped on Mingo.

Mingo – Mingo is a black man and longtime resident of Valentine farm. He is admired by many in the community for having purchased his freedom and the freedom of his family, however he also promotes ideas about racial uplift that many find objectionable.

Justin – Justin is a runway who accompanies Royal on the mission to rescue Cora. He is disturbed by the sight of Royal shooting Boseman.

Red – Red is a black man whose wife and child were lynched in North Carolina. He is brave and fierce and he harbors a strong resentment of white people. He accompanies Royal and Justin when they rescue Cora.

Ollie – Ollie is a kind, elderly black man whom Cora meets after emerging from her final journey on the underground railroad. He offers her food and the novel ends when he and Cora agree to share their stories.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FAMILY, HERITAGE, AND HOME

The beginning chapters of the book introduce the notion that Cora was predestined to run away because her mother, Mabel, also ran away—running away and pursuing freedom is her family "inheritance." Although Cora hates her mother for abandoning her to a life of captivity, the penultimate chapter confirms that Mabel believed that by running away she would implant the idea of freedom in Cora's mind. This lineage of freedom between mother and daughter is further underlined by the garden that Mabel leaves Cora to tend, which is framed as Cora's "inheritance." The significance of the garden lies in the fact that it is a place of refuge, hope, and vitality in the midst of the desolate hell of the plantation. Through the garden, Cora is connected to her mother and other ancestors who came before her, including those who lived free in Africa. Thus, although Cora grows up without her immediate family members, it is her connection to her family that enables her to seek a life of freedom. This idea is emphasized when Cora is described as a "stray" (an orphan, exiled from the normal life of the plantation): while there are negative consequences of being a "stray," Cora's lack of attachment is also what enables her to escape the clutches of captivity multiple times. By stepping "off the path of life," Cora receives access to another path––the path of freedom.

The book also illustrates the ways in which family, kinship, and heritage are distorted by the institution of slavery. In the chapter about Ethel, the narrator notes that, as a child, Ethel was confused by the connection of enslaved people to their white captors, mistaking it for a familial relation: "Ethel thought that a slave was someone who lived in your house like family but was not family." Although this is a naïve misunderstanding of the way slavery really operates, it also highlights the way in which enslaved people live among whites in a far more intimate and interpersonally complex way than is often assumed.

There are many scenes depicting the traumatic separation of families, particularly mothers separated from their children, which was one of the most common manifestations of the brutality of slavery. Due to this practice and the forced erasure of African identity and language, black people in America were severed from their heritage and often could not trace their familial lineage. While this was a form of violence, it also allowed for the formation of new kinds of family, including, the book suggests, a feeling of kinship and solidarity among people

of African descent who are living in America. John Valentine, for example, explains that, although he is personally free, he feels obligated to help runaways because "as long as one of our family endured the torments of bondage, I was a freeman in name only." Throughout the novel, Cora must navigate the difficult balance between maintaining this sense of kinship with others and ruthlessly looking out for her own interests, which is necessary for survival.

The book also illuminates the way in which slavery effectively makes black people homeless within the only country most of them have ever known. Cora wrestles with three different ideas of home: the plantation where she was born, the home of her ancestors in Africa, and the unknown home that she seeks through the underground railroad. Although she was born on Randall, the plantation serves as a hideous distortion of the concept of home; it is a place of endless suffering and death, and once Cora runs away, it is the place where she is least safe in the world. The irony of considering Randall "home" is conveyed when Ridgeway tells Cora after he captures her: "You don't have to be afraid, Cora. You're going home." Cora's ancestral home in Africa, meanwhile, provides her with a feeling of solace and hope; when she works as a "type" at the museum, "ending her day in Scenes from Darkest Africa never failed to cast her into a river of calm." However, this home is also imperfect, because Cora has so little real access to it. She has never been to Africa, doesn't know where in Africa her ancestors come from, and her only lived experience of the continent is through acting within an inaccurate, stereotypical scene in a museum for the benefit of white voyeurs. Finally, Cora searches for a home in the north where she can finally live a free and happy life. To some extent, Valentine's farm serves as the closest thing to a home Cora ever experiences. However, it is not long before Cora is forced to leave the farm and go on the run again. In this sense, Cora's "home" is not any particular place, but the act of being on the run, and, in doing so, seeking freedom.

ENDURANCE VS. REBELLION

All the black characters in the novel—whether enslaved or free—must constantly navigate an impossible choice between enduring the brutality of slavery and racism or risking everything in a (likely doomed) attempt to rebel. The entire system of slavery and white supremacy is designed to make black people believe that they have no hope of rebellion, for example by making it illegal for enslaved people to learn to read and write. Similarly, the torture and execution of captured runaways and their accomplices—such as Big Anthony and those hanged on the Freedom Trail—is designed to serve as a warning for anyone who dreams of rebellion. Although life under slavery is unbearable, many enslaved people are forced to endure it because the only other "choice" is a grisly, sadistic death.

Similarly, any white person who feels sympathy for the enslaved is confronted with the fact that if they choose to assist enslaved people, they will likely be killed along with their families. Before Cora decides to run away, she views the option of enduring slavery as the only way in which she can exercise autonomy: "White man trying to kill you slow every day, and sometimes trying to kill you fast. Why make it easy for him? That was one kind of work you could say no to."

Those who still choose to rebel against slavery despite the near-certainty of failure are often characterized as insane. When Caesar first approaches Cora to ask her to run away with him, Cora thinks of the idea as a "prank," "a trick he was playing on himself," and "idiocy." Despite the hellish conditions on Randall plantation, the idea of running away still strikes Cora as lunacy. In this sense, it is Cora's placement in Hob—a shack on Randall for female slaves who are considered mentally unstable or disturbed—that allows her to eventually decide to run away. By being placed in Hob, Cora is exiled from the community of other enslaved people on Randall, and, by extension, from the social logic of this community. It is only this break from the social fabric that allows Cora to begin to imagine herself free. This underlines that, for enslaved people, insanity is a form of rebellion, because it is necessary to be "insane" in order to believe in the possibility of becoming free.

Rebellion also occupies a powerful place in the imagination of white slave-owners and their allies, who live in constant fear of slave rebellion. In the early 19th century, when the novel is set, the tension between the northern states—where slavery is outlawed—and the southern "slave states" threatens to tear the country apart (and will, of course, eventually lead to the Civil War in the 1860s and abolition of slavery in all states). Furthermore, slave rebellions in parts of the south as well as in the Caribbean and Latin America make slave-owners feel increasingly uneasy about the possibility of violent resistance. Some white people even choose to leave the south due to the fear of being killed in a slave rebellion: "The specter of colored rebellion, all those angry dark faces surrounding them, had stirred white settlers to leave the south."

Although individual enslaved people might not realize it, personal acts of rebellion are thus part of a much larger movement that will, eventually, lead to the overthrow of slavery altogether. This is brought into particular relief in the story of Mabel and Cora. Cora spends her life feeling resentful of Mabel for selfishly abandoning her, and at the end of the novel it is revealed that Mabel does not make it far from Randall before dying of a snakebite. However, Mabel's rebellion allows Cora to rebel, and at the end of the novel Cora seems to have finally succeeded in reaching freedom. Although individual acts of rebellion can often seem selfish, risky, and foolish at the time, in reality they are part of a broader network of resistance that succeeds in gradually chipping away at the power of slavery.

DEATH AND FREEDOM

Most of the enslaved people Cora knows—including Cora herself—have never known freedom, and the system of slavery is so brutal and expansive that most of them cannot imagine becoming free during their lifetime. However, Cora notes that even those who would never consider running away still dream of freedom: "Every dream a dream of escape." Although enslaved people may not be able to consciously imagine freedom, they seek freedom in their unconsciousness. Meanwhile, other enslaved people turn to suicide or religion as an escape from their conscious reality, both of which promise freedom in death. Furthermore, the likelihood of dying in an escape attempt is so high that slaves who choose to run away are choosing death as much as they are choosing freedom. In this way, freedom and death are inherently interlinked for black people living under slavery.

The twinning of freedom and death is encapsulated most powerfully in the "Freedom Trail," a seemingly endless path along which runaways and those who try to help them are hanged and left on display. The name "Freedom Trail" serves as a warning that, for enslaved people, the search for freedom means certain death. Of course, this warning seeks to conceal the fact that sometimes enslaved people *do* escape; on the rare occasions when runaways are successful, their freedom is also often linked to the deaths of others. For example, soon after fleeing Randall plantation Cora kills a 12-year-old white boy, and when Terrance Randall dies it is suggested that the distress caused by Cora's escape led to his death. These events highlight that the struggle between black freedom and white supremacy is a fight to the death; both can survive only through the murder of the other.

In another sense, however, death and freedom are opposites. Life on the plantation is to some extent a form of living death—in Cora's words, a way of being killed "slowly" by white slave-owners. The only way of escaping this slow death is by running away. Even Mabel, who dies from a snakebite shortly after fleeing Randall, achieves a kind of immortality by forever evading the slave-catchers who attempt to track her down: since Mabel's body is swallowed by a swamp, none of the characters ever find out what happened to her, and thus they end up imagining that she is living a life of freedom up north. This idea of Mabel's freedom encourages Caesar and Cora to escape, and thus ultimately bestows on Cora a chance at life and freedom.

Meanwhile, black people's freedom is always haunted by the threat of death because of the inescapable system of white supremacy. The free utopia of Valentine's farm meets a bloody end when Ridgeway and other whites descend on the community and murder those who live there. Similarly, the black people who live in the South Carolina dormitories think they are free, only to discover that they are in fact being subjected to a medical experiment that will infect them with illness and prevent them from having children, two fates that are a kind of metaphorical (and in some cases literal) death. The narrator observes that, "the women in the colored dormitories of South Carolina believed they knew liberty, but the surgeons' knives cut them to prove otherwise." Elsewhere, the narrator remarks: "Because that's what you do when you take away someone's babies—steal their future." Both these statements emphasize the idea that even free black people are at a constant risk of having their lives and future taken away from them, and that no black person living during the era of slavery can access freedom that isn't in some sense haunted by death.

VALUE, OWNERSHIP, AND COMMODIFICATION

Throughout the book, the narrator emphasizes that slavery is an *economic* system, and that the social and moral behavior of the white characters is fundamentally governed by economic interests. For example, Terrance Randall's sadistic personality and cruel, lecherous behavior toward Cora is linked with his desire to make Randall plantation as efficient and profitable as possible. Similarly, Ridgeway decides to kill the captured slave Jasper because he calculates that it will be more financially profitable to kill Jasper than to let him live. This scene demonstrates how the desire for profit perverts all sense of morality. Although Ridgeway is technically "right" that shooting Jasper will save him money, on an ethical level Ridgeway is obviously in the wrong. The law of the time dictates that enslaved people cannot own property (because legally, they are considered property themselves), and the narrator summarizes the relationship of enslaved people to economic capital with the statement: "Some might call freedom the dearest currency of all."

The book also explores the way in which enslaved people are reduced to their capacity to make a profit, with their bodies used like tools or machines. Slave-owners push the bodies of enslaved people past the limit of endurance and treat the matter of an enslaved person being injured or dying through overwork without remorse. Indeed, slave-owners are able to treat enslaved people carelessly because they also oversee enforced reproduction among the enslaved population. In this sense, enslaved people are treated more like farm animals than human beings. From the perspective of slave-owners, the act of producing a child is divorced from the normal context of love and family because slave children (or "pickaninnies" as they are called in the racist vocabulary of the time) are simply seen as a resource for profit, rather than as people. Slave-owners thus routinely separate enslaved children from their parents and sell them off to make even more money.

Cora's story also reveals other ways in which black people's bodies are commodified (meaning turned into an object with financial value) beyond the system of slavery. When Cora

escapes the plantation, she escapes a certain kind of forced labor, but she quickly finds that other white people want to use black bodies in different ways to make a profit. For example, in South Carolina she discovers that the white doctors are using black people's bodies for medical experiments. The reason for this is that the medical profession is facing a shortage of bodies on which to experiment, and professional body snatchers know that black people have little legal or social power to protest the use of black bodies for medical experimentation. This fact emphasizes the way in which bodies are seen as commodities or things, rather than human beings. Cora's job working as a "type" at the museum further underlines the way white people treat black people's bodies as objects for their own voyeuristic pleasure and profit. Whereas the white figures in the museum scenes are dolls, the black figures are real people, confirming the idea that white supremacy casts white people as humans and black people as merely things.

Throughout Cora's journey, she is constantly reminded of the fact that most of the country's infrastructure has been built by slave labor. When Caesar asks Lumbly who built the underground railroad, Lumbly replies: "Who builds anything in this country?" Similarly, when Cora goes into hiding with Martin and Ethel in North Carolina, she notices that everything in the town around her has been constructed by black people: "The only thing colored folks hadn't built was the tree. God had made that, for the town to bend to evil ends." These observations explore the deeply ironic fact that enslaved black people were kidnapped from Africa and forced to build a country that in turn imprisons, tortures, and kills them. This irony reveals a lie at the foundation of America—while American identity is founded on the notions of freedom and individual merit, in reality the country is constructed by an imprisoned population forced to work for the benefit of others.

BRUTALITY AND VIOLATION

The Underground Railroad depicts the full spectrum of brutality and violation that defined the institution of slavery. Violence is such a large part of ordinary life in the world of the novel that Cora and the other characters are unsurprised by even the most sadistic and gruesome events, such as Big Anthony's punishment after he is caught attempting to run away. At the same time, Whitehead is careful to show that Cora and other black people in the book are not numbed to the violence that surrounds them, even if they are often forced to suppress their emotions to avoid further punishment from white people. For example, when Ridgeway tells Cora that after being caught Lovey was hung by her ribs on a large metal spike, "Cora covered her mouth to keep in her scream. She failed." This incident highlights the way in which Cora and other black people hide their reactions to the brutality of slavery as a self-protective gesture, a defence mechanism against the seemingly endless sadism of whites.

The fundamental injustice of slavery also leads some of the black characters to commit acts of violence themselves with apparent indifference. Early on in the novel, Cora is gang-raped by four male slaves and later she kills a 12-year-old white boy while escaping from Randall. When reflecting on whether or not she feels guilty for killing the boy, Cora concludes that she doesn't because it was necessary for her escape. Cora has endured so much violence that the notion of avoiding committing violence herself is absurd. Indeed, considering Cora's experiences in life, it is perhaps surprising that she doesn't have a more vengeful attitude toward white people. Even when she has the chance to kill Ridgeway, she chooses only to kick him three times before letting him live—a decision that comes back to haunt her when Ridgeway and his gang arrive at Valentine's farm. This turn of events suggests that showing any mercy to white slave-owners and slave-catchers is an unwise and dangerous choice.

Indeed, many white people in the novel are shockingly indifferent to the suffering of black people, and several seem to take great pleasure in subjecting black people to unimaginable tortures. One of the most disturbing scenes in the book comes early on, when Terrance Randall and his guests eat while Big Anthony is punished in front of them: "Big Anthony was whipped for the duration of their meal, and they ate slow." This moment highlights the way in which the sadistic torture of black people is not only treated as a necessary tool to maintain white domination, but as a source of pleasure and entertainment for white people. The notion that white people gain pleasure from the suffering of black people is most heavily emphasized through the many examples of the sexual violation that was ubiquitous during slavery. This is particularly pronounced in the character of Terrance, who boasts: "I like to taste my plums," meaning the enslaved women that are legally his property. The behavior of Terrance and other white men who delight in raping black women conveys the fact that even though slavery is primarily an economic system whose main focus is to produce profit, sadism and sexual desire are also important drivers in the perpetuation of slavery and white supremacy.

HISTORY, MYTH, AND FANTASY

The Underground Railroad is a historical novel, and much of what takes place is an accurate representation of what life in mid-19th century America was really like. At the same time, Whitehead also deliberately weaves fantastical and ahistorical elements into the narrative, some of which are more immediately recognizable to readers than others. This decision is a deliberate rejection of the demand that historical fiction realistically and accurately represents the past. By rejecting absolute realism in this way, Whitehead reminds the reader that there is much about the historical reality of black people's

lives in America that is impossible to know, due to the fact that enslaved people were forbidden to read or write. The fantastical aspects of the narrative—such as the Freedom Trail—also emphasize the idea that slavery was stranger (and more horrifying) than fiction, particularly from the perspective of the enslaved people who were forced to endure it.

Whitehead's deliberately inaccurate use of history also serves as a horrifying reminder of the way in which slavery is not a relic of the distant past, but a markedly recent phenomenon that still affects the present. Cora's experience in South Carolina is based not on the mid 19th century, but rather on events from the eugenics movement that blossomed in the early 20th century, as well as the Tuskegee syphilis experiment of 1932-1972 and forced sterilization programs that are still inflicted on black women (particularly those who are incarcerated) today. By distorting the course of history in this manner, Whitehead challenges the reader's assumptions that slavery is confined to the past through showing the institution's powerful afterlife in the present.

Perhaps the most important fantastical feature of the narrative is the underground railroad itself. While the underground railroad was certainly real, in most cases it was not a literal railroad in the way it is depicted in the novel. Rather, it was a route of safe houses and "station agents" who helped convey enslaved people to freedom through a number of different methods. Enslaved people who escaped to freedom via the railroad did so through every available mode of transportation, including traveling in carts and wagons, on horse, and on foot. (It is worth noting that some critics have overemphasized the idea that the underground railroad was *never* a literal railroad. Historical evidence suggests that—at least in some places—there was a real railroad devoted to transporting runaways to the north.) By making the metaphor of the railroad into a literal, physical phenomenon, Whitehead questions assumptions about what is "real" and what isn't when it comes to African-American history. In doing so, he draws attention to the fact that the very notion of black freedom is beyond imagination in a white supremacist context. This idea is particularly emphasized in the character of Ridgeway, who is confounded and infuriated by his continued inability to capture Mabel and Cora.

Beyond the question of historical accuracy of the narrative itself, many of the white characters in the novel remain committed to a mythical, false version of American history. This is best conveyed through the repeated references to the Declaration of Independence, which states that America is founded on the belief that all men are created free and equal. Such a statement is disproven by the reality of slavery and black peoples' legal status as less than human. In his speech at the last meeting on Valentine, Elijah Lander references the dishonesty and hypocrisy of this American myth by pointing out that the whole country is built on the false belief that white people have a right to steal Indian territory and torture and enslave non-white people. In light of this, black people must commit to their own delusion—the idea of their own freedom. Fantasy and myth are thus shown to have both positive and negative consequences in the novel. Furthermore, the boundary between history and myth is blurred, particularly for black people whose very existence is a threat to the fantasy of white supremacy.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CORA'S GARDEN

The garden is a small patch of land on Randall, just three yards squared, on which Cora grows vegetables. The garden was passed down from Ajarry to Mabel, and—when Mabel ran away—to Cora. The garden is described as Cora's "inheritance," and thus it is a physical manifestation of the personal qualities Cora inherited from her mother and grandmother: the ability to persevere from Ajarry, and the courage for rebellion from Mabel. Endurance and rebellion are also both contained within the garden itself, as the garden presents the opportunity for Cora to take ownership over something, thereby reclaiming ownership over herself. When both Cora and Mabel run away, they bring produce from the garden to help sustain them; the garden thus becomes a symbol of life, possibility, the future, and freedom. Since familial relationships under slavery are filled with loss, trauma, and separation, tending to the garden becomes a kind of substitute for the nurture and care normally practiced within the family. When Blake tries to take over the garden for his dog, Cora fiercely defends it, foreshadowing her defense of her own life and freedom throughout the novel.

DANCE

In the novel, dance is shown to be both a source of joy and of suffering. Dance has an important history within African-American communities; under slavery, it was a way of connecting back to cultural traditions in Africa, as well as a rare moment at which enslaved people could feel joyful and free. However, traditional African dance was mostly banned in an effort to cut off enslaved people from their heritage. Slave owners also regularly forced enslaved people to dance for their entertainment, as Terrance does early in the novel. Because of this, dance takes on a sinister edge, and can become a reminder of the control white people exercise over the bodies of the enslaved. Unlike many of the other characters, Cora is averse to dancing completely. While other characters

are able to shake off the negative associations with dance in order to enjoy dancing, Cora cannot disassociate dance from enslavement. Furthermore, the experience of being in such close proximity to male bodies—even in a happy and innocent setting—reminds Cora of the night she was raped. In this way, dance also represents sexuality. Whereas sexuality is sometimes shown to be a source of joy in the novel, most of the time it is associated with violence, violation, and powerlessness. The institutionalized rape of black women during slavery means that, like dance, sex often becomes irrevocably poisoned with negative associations.

HOB

When Mabel runs away, Cora becomes a "stray" and is placed in Hob, the cabin for exiled women on Randall. Although the other people living on Randall believe that all Hob women are insane, the only thing that truly unites the women there is their exclusion from the rest of the community. Some have indeed been driven to mental instability by the trauma and violence of slavery, whereas others—like Cora—have simply been labeled as strange and rejected on account of their perceived difference. Being sent to Hob is generally thought of as a curse; many of the residents stay away from Hob women, and there are bizarre rumors spread about them (such as the story that Cora has sex with animals). However, Cora comes to love the other women in Hob and the community they build together. Being labeled insane, in fact, offers a form of protection from violence and hostility. Furthermore, because the decision to run away requires an element of madness, Hob becomes a stepping stone on Cora's route to freedom. Being cast out of the community allows Cora to dream of casting *herself* out of Randall and into the terrifying unknown of life on the run. Throughout her journey to freedom, Cora carries the spirit of Hob with her, which encourages her to be brave, rebellious, and fierce.

GRIFFIN BUILDING

The Griffin Building is a 12-story building in the unnamed town in South Carolina where Cora lives in the dormitories. It is the tallest building Cora has ever seen, and one of the tallest in all of the South. Mr. Anderson, Cora's employer, works in the building managing cotton contracts. Hospital administration takes place in the building and records are also kept there, with files for all of the black dormitory residents. When Cora takes the Anderson children to visit their father, she is stunned by her ride in the elevator, although the children are used to it and pay it no mind. Due to its size and high-tech features, Griffin symbolizes modernity, progress, and the future. The vision of the future that Griffin represents is one of bureaucracy, capitalist wealth, and scientific research. The residents of the town are proud of this vision, believing that Griffin symbolizes their achievements. However, as the novel shows, there is a very dark underside to these aspects of modernity. Bureaucratic laws and record keeping allow the state to maintain control over black people, and the profits made in the South are produced through the exploitation and brutality of slavery. Furthermore, the medical research conducted on black people at the hospital is done without proper consent. Griffin thus comes to symbolize the way in which American progress and modernity is constructed through violence against the black population.

THE FREEDOM TRAIL

The Freedom Trail is an endless row of lynched black bodies in North Carolina, left out on display to warn black people against rebellion. The bodies are mutilated and rotting, and the Freedom Trail thus represents the gory reality of white supremacy. The Trail is a mythic site with fantastical elements, such as the fact that it has no beginning or end. In this way, the Trail represents the limitless and unimaginable violence exerted on black people and the absolute moral vacuum of white supremacy. While no such trail existed in history, lynching was such a massive phenomenon that if the bodies of all the black people lynched in America were lined up, the trail would indeed stretch out in a seemingly infinite manner. Furthermore, because this violence was so widespread and normalized, it is impossible to know the exact numbers of people murdered in this way. The infinite nature of the Freedom Trail thus represents the unknowability of the history of black life in America, particularly given the fact that enslaved people were forbidden from recording accounts of their own lives and that those who were lynched were silenced forever. The trail confirms the symbolic link between death and freedom in the novel. While Cora is on the run, most of the people who flee with her or help her are killed, and thus Cora is haunted by her own symbolic Freedom Trail comprised of all the deaths that take place during her escape.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Doubleday edition of *The Underground Railroad* published in 2016.

Chapter 1: Ajarry Quotes

She knew that the white man's scientists peered beneath things to understand how they worked. The movement of the stars across the night, the cooperation of humors in the blood. The temperature requirements for a healthy cotton harvest. Ajarry made a science of her own black body and accumulated observations… in America the quirk was that people were things.

Related Characters: Ajarry (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Cora's grandmother Ajarry was born in Africa before being kidnapped and transported across the Atlantic to America. Once there, Ajarry is sold many times, and she gradually comes to learn about how enslaved people are valued. In this passage, the narrator compares this knowledge to the scientific research conducted by white scientists. In America, black people's bodies are commodified, meaning they are turned into objects with which white people can make a profit. This is true in an obvious sense with slavery, but is also true in a less obvious sense when it comes to scientific research.

As the fields of human biology and medicine evolved during the 19th century, many experiments were conducted on black people by white scientists. White supremacy dictated that only white people were intelligent enough to become scientists, whereas black people were thought to be useful only as objects of study. However, this passage disproves this view—even without any formal education, Ajarry comes to understand the "science" of her own body and how she is assigned financial value. Ajarry herself is thus also a scientist, although her knowledge is not considered legitimate within the context of white supremacy.

To escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence: impossible.

Related Characters: Ajarry

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

After being sold many times, Ajarry arrives on Randall where she remains until her death. To Ajarry, this death seemed inevitable, because the possibility of freedom was completely unimaginable to her. This is ironic, of course, as Ajarry is one of the only black characters in the novel who was actually born free and who began life with no knowledge of bondage at all. This quotation introduces the idea that enslavement destroys people's possibilities in life, not only in a physical sense, but also in a mental and emotional one. It is beyond the imaginative capacity of many people to envision the transformation from enslavement to freedom—to do so is an act of madness, or fantasy.

Chapter 2: Georgia Quotes

Feast or no feast, this was where Cora ended up every Sunday when their half day of work was done: perched on her seat, looking for things to fix. She owned herself for a few hours every week was how she looked at it, to tug weeds, pluck caterpillars, thin out the sour greens, and glare at anyone planning incursions on her territory. Tending to her bed was necessary maintenance but also a message that she had not lost her resolve since the day of the hatchet.

The dirt at her feet had a story, the oldest story Cora knew.

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

It is Sunday on Randall, and the enslaved community is preparing to celebrate Jockey's birthday with a feast. Jockey, one of the oldest enslaved people on the plantation, doesn't know his real birthday, but he picks days at random as excuses for celebration. Lovey asks Cora which day she would pick for her birthday, but Cora dismisses her, saying you can't choose. Rather than choosing her birthday, Cora exercises autonomy by tending to her garden. Every Sunday, during the precious hours she has away from forced labor, Cora works on maintaining her small plot of land.

At first it might seem strange that Cora, who is forced to spend almost all her time toiling in the fields, would choose to spend her few hours off working in her garden. Why add further labor to a life of bondage? However, as this passage makes clear, tending to the garden gives Cora a sense of control, autonomy, and ownership over her life. Because she

spends most of her time being forced to work for others, she finds it rewarding to be able to choose to work towards creating and nurturing new forms of life; this allows Cora to endure the misery of enslavement. Furthermore, through the garden, Cora is connected to her mother and grandmother. The garden is thus one of the only ways Cora can access her dead relatives and the mystery of her ancestry.

> There was an order of misery, misery tucked inside miseries, and you were meant to keep track.

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie), Alice

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation refers to the hierarchies of power that exist on the plantation. Normally, Cora brings vegetables from her garden to the feasts, but she doesn't bring any to this feast, in part because she is still insulted that last time she brought vegetables Alice, the cook, threw them away. Cora cannot say anything about the wasted vegetables, though, because Alice is a favorite of James Randall—the social hierarchy on Randall is explicit, powerful, and intended to perpetuate injustice. The description of "misery tucked inside miseries" notes that to preserve such social hierarchies in the midst of the absolute terror and brutality of slavery just adds insult to injury. However, the extreme difficulty of life as an enslaved person means, often, that such hierarchies remain unchallenged because they are not the most pressing issues.

> Cora was still squinting over his idiocy when she got her first bowl of the soup. White man trying to kill you slow every day, and sometimes trying to kill you fast. Why make it easy for him? That was one kind of work you could say no to.

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie), Caesar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Caesar has pulled Cora aside and invited her to run away with him, but Cora thinks the idea is absurd and that Caesar is a fool. However, Cora does not refuse Caesar because she lacks an instinct for rebellion; rather, as this passage shows, it is Cora's desire to rebel that initially prompts her to want to endure life on Randall. Cora has very few opportunities to make decisions about her own life. To her, simply the act of survival is a defiant exercise in autonomy against the white men who try to kill her through physical strain and punishment. However, this view is complicated, as Cora is also a tool through which these white men profit. Her refusal to run away assumes with certainty that she will get caught—but what if she doesn't?

> They were exiles, but Hob provided a type of protection once they settled in. By playing up their strangeness, the way a slave simpered and acted childlike to escape a beating, they evaded the entanglements of the quarter. The walls of Hob made a fortress some nights, rescuing them from the feuds and conspiracies. White men eat you up, but sometimes colored folk eat you up, too.

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

When Mabel left, Cora was placed in Hob, a cabin for women considered strange and mentally unstable. There is a strong stigma attached to being placed in Hob, and most people on Randall believe it is a curse to become a "Hob woman." However, this passage indicates that there is also a positive side to be being placed in Hob. Because they are labeled as strange and different, Hob women tend to be left alone and spared the "feuds" and dramas that can make life on Randall even more dangerous than it already is. In this sense, Cora's experience in Hob highlights the fact that there are both positive and negative sides to belonging to a community, just as there are positive and negative sides to being excluded by a community.

Every slave thinks about it. In the morning and in the afternoon and in the night. Dreaming of it. Every dream a dream of escape even when it didn't look like it. When it was a dream of new shoes.

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie), Lovey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Cora and Caesar set off at night, fleeing into the darkness, and they make it some distance before noticing that Lovey has been following them. Cora is surprised by this, as she doesn't really think of Lovey as someone with a rebellious side. However, this quotation notes that "every slave thinks about it"—"it" meaning freedom—even if these thoughts are not conscious. Enslaved people thus have a paradoxical relationship to freedom. On one hand, the institution of slavery works to shut down the very notion of black freedom in people's minds. However, as this quotation indicates, even those who have never personally known freedom—and who could never hope to—spend their lives fantasizing about it.

This was the farthest she had ever been from home. Even if she were dragged

away at this moment and put in chains, she would still have these miles.

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Cora, Caesar, and Lovey journey through the night, battling bites and injuries. When day breaks, Lovey notes that the people back on Randall now know that they are missing. However, when thinking about the possibility of being captured, Cora is defiant. Just the act of fleeing is, in a way, a victory, even if Cora is ultimately caught. Note the use of the word "home" in this passage; while Randall is the only home Cora has ever known, it seems perverse to refer to the plantation as a home when she has only lived there due to her captivity.

Part of the condition of being a black person in America is this sense of homelessness; while black people are unwelcome in American territory, most have no experience of the African lands from which their ancestors originated. This quotation introduces the idea that simply being on the run is a kind of home—the home of freedom.

Chapter 3: Ridgeway Quotes

The cotton gin meant bigger cotton yields and the iron tools to harvest it, iron horseshoes for the horses tugging the wagons with iron rims and parts that took it to market. More slaves and the iron to hold them. The crop birthed communities, requiring nails and braces for houses, the tools to build the houses, roads to connect them, and more iron to keep it all running. Let his father keep his disdain and his spirit, too. The two men were parts of the same system, serving a nation rising to its destiny.

Related Characters: Arnold Ridgeway (speaker), Ridgeway Sr.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

Ridgeway is the son of a blacksmith with a gentle, spiritual personality who disapproves of his son's decision to become a slave catcher. Ridgeway resents his father's attitude and believes that his father's views on slavery are hypocritical, because it is through making the metal chains and tools used on plantations that Ridgeway Sr. is able to make a living. This passage explores the moral problem of existing in an economy that is totally fuelled by slavery. While Ridgeway's father rejects violence and prefers a peaceful, empathetic view of the world, he nonetheless directly profits from the exploitation of slaves.

By representing slavery as an economic system in which everyone is implicated, Whitehead highlights the fact that racist violence is the product of the overall structure of society, rather than individual acts (although, as Ridgeway himself proves, individuals can play a large role in carrying out particularly heinous acts of brutality). Ridgeway's comment about America's destiny suggests that all white settlers are to some extent complicit in slavery, even those who personally oppose it.

Chapter 4: South Carolina Quotes

Once Mabel ran, Cora thought of her as little as possible. After landing in South Carolina, she realized that she had banished her mother not from sadness but from rage. She hated her. Having tasted freedom's bounty, it was incomprehensible to Cora that Mabel had abandoned her to that hell. A child. Her company would have made the escape more difficult, but Cora hadn't been a baby. If she could pick cotton, she could run. She would have died in that place, after untold brutalities, if Caesar had not come along. In the train, in the deathless tunnel, she had finally asked him why he brought her with him. Caesar said, "Because I knew you could do it."

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie), Caesar, Mabel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

In South Carolina, Cora is careful to guard the secret of her true identity. However, she is eventually too tempted by the opportunity to ask Miss Lucy to check the records for any information about Mabel. Overall, Cora still feels furious and resentful toward Mabel, particularly now that she has experienced freedom for herself. How could Mabel have left her to suffer and die on Randall? This passage makes clear that Cora has invented her own mythology about Mabel, just as Caesar has his own fantasy about Cora. Cora is convinced that Mabel needlessly and carelessly abandoned her, and Caesar is convinced that Cora would be able to successfully escape. Although these stories both contain kernels of truth, their main purpose is arguably to provide a sense of assurance to Cora and Caesar as they journey through brutal conditions and the terrifying unknown.

As she moved through the examination, Cora got the impression she was being conveyed on a belt, like one of Caesar's products, tended down the line with care and diligence.

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie), Caesar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112-113

Explanation and Analysis

In South Carolina, Cora has gone for a second examination at the hospital, this time with the young and friendly Dr. Stevens. In this passage, Cora reflects that the experience of being examined feels like being one of the products Caesar makes in his factory. At first this comparison may seem like a positive thing, as Caesar treats his products with "care and diligence." However, it is in fact evidence of the extent to which Cora is being treated as a commodity—an object through which white people can profit. This treatment violates the proper purpose of medicine, which is to help the person receiving care. Instead, Cora is being used as an object of voyeurism, curiosity, and exploitation.

Stolen bodies working stolen land. It was an engine that did not stop, its hungry boiler fed with blood. With the surgeries that Dr. Stevens described, Cora thought, the whites had begun stealing futures in earnest. Cut you open and rip them out, dripping. Because that's what you do when you take away someone's babies––steal their future. Torture them as much as you can when

they are on this earth, then take away the hope that one day their people will have it better.

Related Characters: Dr. Aloysius Stevens (speaker), Cora (aka Bessie)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

At the examination conducted by Dr. Stevens, he notes that Cora has had sexual relations and he asks if she has considered being sterilized, adding that, for many black women, sterilization is mandatory. Cora is horrified at having discovered the dark secret beneath life in South Carolina. To her, Dr. Stevens' words about sterilization fit within the broader "engine" of life in America, which is powered by violence against and exploitation of nonwhite people. Cora's use of the word "engine" is significant, as it underlines the connection between white supremacy and capitalist industrialism. Science and industry, which are often considered to be good and progressive, are in fact tools through which black people are tortured and killed.

This passage also identifies a crucial way in which white supremacy destroys not only a present generation of the black population, but their hope for the future, as well. Through the traumatic separation of families under slavery and forced sterilization programs, black people were

robbed even of the hope that one day future generations might experience freedom for themselves.

❝ Perhaps they would prefer not to know, Caesar said. What were these rumors compared to what they had been freed from? What sort of calculation would their neighbors make, weighing all the promises of their new circumstances

against the allegations and the truth of their own pasts? According to the law, most of them were still property, their names on pieces of paper in cabinets kept by the United States Government. For the moment, warning people was all they could do.

Related Characters: Caesar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

On discovering the truth of the medical experiments and forced sterilizations that are taking place in South Carolina, Cora and Caesar despair over what they should do. If they attempt to warn the black dormitory residents, it is likely that many would not believe them. Furthermore, even if their revelations were accepted as truth, this would put the residents in an impossible position of choosing the lesser of two absolute evils. While being subject to harmful medical experimentation and forced sterilization is horrific, for most residents it is still an improvement on the brutality of slavery from which they fled.

This dilemma doesn't represent one particular moment in history—remember that the Tuskegee syphilis experiment on which the South Carolina chapter is based did not occur until the mid-20th century—but rather the repeated injustices to which black people have been subjected throughout American history. The proctors in South Carolina take advantage of the fact that black people in the south are desperate to flee slavery at all costs, and they use that fact to exploit and violate the black population. This represents a long tradition of white people subjecting African Americans to injustice and violation, with the excuse that it is a mild improvement on even worse brutality.

Chapter 6: North Carolina Quotes

❝ At one point the girls started for the attic but reconsidered after a discussion about the habits and customs of ghosts. There was indeed a ghost in the house, but she was done with chains, rattling or no.

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

Cora is being hidden in the attic of Martin and Ethel Wells' house in North Carolina. Only Martin and Ethel know she is there, and when their daughter and her family come to visit, Cora must remain absolutely still and silent so as not to arouse suspicion. At one point, the visitors decide to go up to the attic, but they change their minds after fearing that there is a ghost up there. This quotation explores the idea that Cora is, in some sense, a ghost; this is a statement that could have several possible meanings.

On one level, Cora is ghostlike because of the way in which she disappeared from Randall. Almost everyone who knew her probably believes that she is dead, and, as she cannot communicate with them, there is, in this sense, little difference between death and freedom. Cora is also a "ghost" because of her potential for instilling fear in white people. Although whites do everything in their power to maintain control over black people, this belies the fact that white people are deeply afraid of the black population. As a free black person who fled slavery and will do anything necessary to defend her freedom, Cora is many white people's worst nightmare.

Cora rarely thought of the boy she had killed. She did not need to defend her actions in the woods that night; no one had the right to call her to account. Terrance Randall provided a model for a mind that could conceive of North Carolina's new system, but the scale of the violence was hard to settle in her head. Fear drove these people, even more than cotton money. The shadow of the black hand that will return what has been given. It occurred to her one night that she was one of the vengeful monsters they were scared of: She had killed a white boy. She might kill one of them next. And because of that fear, they erected a new scaffolding of oppression on the cruel foundation laid hundreds of years before. That was Sea Island cotton the slaver had ordered for his rows, but scattered among the seeds were those of violence and death, and that crop grew fast. The whites were right to be afraid. One day the system would collapse in blood.

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie), Terrance Randall

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

Confined to the attic, Cora is forced to spend many hours without any distraction or human interaction, an experience that forces her to reflect on her memories and concoct fantasies (and nightmares) about the future. While she spends a lot of time turning over the memories of her escape in her mind, she doesn't often think about the 12-year-old boy she killed during the conflict with the hog hunters. Her experiences since running away have illuminated for her the extent to which she is a manifestation of white people's greatest fears, and also that it is this fear—even more than economic incentives—that fuels the system of slavery.

This passage explores the way in which this fear both empowers and disempowers Cora and other black people who choose to rebel. On one hand, Cora realizes that white people consider her to be a threat, a fact that emboldens her and convinces her that one day "the system would collapse in blood." Slavery and white supremacy are not inevitable—they are actually far more fragile than white people make it appear. However, in a more immediate sense, white people react to rebellion with increased brutality, "a new scaffolding of oppression." This places those who rebel in a difficult position, as they know that not only do they risk their own punishment, but they also risk other vulnerable people being punished in their stead.

Colored labor had erected every house on the park, laid the stones in the fountain and the paving of the walkways. Hammered the stage where the night riders performed their grotesque pageants and the wheeled platform that delivered the doomed men and women to the air. The only thing colored folks hadn't built was the tree. God had made that, for the town to bend to evil ends.

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie), Lumbly

Related Themes:

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

Through the tiny crack in the attic wall, Cora looks down at the town square. Although the town is now all white, black people remain present through the products of their labor. In this quotation, Cora echoes Lumbly's statement earlier in the novel—"Who builds anything in this country?"—which implies that black labor is the reason that any American infrastructure exists. Although Cora of course always knew that black people were a major component of America's labor force, it is only through traveling through the country that she realizes the extreme extent to which the entire nation has been constructed through black slave labor. Cora notes the cruel irony of the fact that the only thing in the square black people didn't build is the tree, which is what the white population uses to lynch black people with.

What a world it is, Cora thought, that makes a living prison into your only haven. Was she out of bondage or in its web: how to describe the status of a runaway? Freedom was a thing that shifted as you looked at it, the way a forest is dense with trees up close but from outside, from the empty meadow, you see its true limits. Being free had nothing to do with chains or how much space you had. On the plantation, she was not free, but she moved unrestricted on its acres, tasting the air and tracing the summer stars. The place was big in its smallness. Here, she was free of her master but slunk around a warren so tiny she couldn't stand.

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

Cora has been growing increasingly exasperated with her confinement to the attic, and has begged Martin to organize

her transportation to the next station on the underground railroad. However, Martin is reluctant to do so because he is too nervous that they will be caught. This passage illustrates the suffocating frustration that Cora experiences in the attic, which is so intense that she begins to wonder if she perhaps had more freedom back on Randall.

Cora's thoughts illuminate the notion that freedom is not a concrete, absolute phenomenon, but rather a relative one. Even in bondage, Cora experienced some aspects of freedom, such as the fact that she could walk around the plantation in the open air. On the other hand, as an enslaved person she was placed under constant surveillance and subjected to constant arbitrary punishments. Cora's comparison between her life on Randall and at Martin's house reflects the idea that there are two types of freedom—"freedom from" and "freedom to." While in the attic Cora is free *from* the brutalities and restrictions of slavery, she is not free *to* go anywhere or even make a sound, which makes the attic feel like a tiny prison cell.

Chapter 7: Ethel Quotes

❝ Ethel thought that a slave was someone who lived in your house like family but was not family. Her father explained the origin of the negro to disabuse her of this colorful idea. Some maintained that the negro was the remnant of a race of giants who had ruled the earth in an ancient time, but Edgar Delany knew they were descendants of cursed, black Ham, who had survived the Flood by clinging to the peaks of a mountain in Africa. Ethel thought that if they were cursed, they required Christian guidance all the more.

Related Characters: Ethel Wells (née Delany), Edgar Delany

Related Themes:

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

This chapter tells the story of Ethel's childhood. Ethel's family owned two slaves, a woman named Felice and her daughter, Jasmine. As children, Ethel and Jasmine were best friends who loved playing together and had a relationship "like sisters." As a result, Ethel grows up with a confused notion of the relationship between enslaved people and their captors, mistaking it for a familial relation. In this passage, Ethel's father, Edgar, explains to Ethel that she is wrong by telling her a Biblical myth about the origin of black people that was commonly used to justify slavery from a Christian perspective. Many of the abolitionist characters in the novel oppose slavery on Christian grounds, but Edgar's explanation highlights the fact that many proponents of slavery supported their beliefs from a Christian perspective.

Of course, both Edgar and Ethel have a factually incorrect and racist understanding of the relationship between white people and enslaved black people, although their perspectives take drastically different forms. Ethel's childlike innocence allows her to acknowledge that intimacy is a big part of the relationship between slave-owners and the enslaved, however what she doesn't realize is that this intimacy is one-sided, the result of white people forcing their emotional and social desires on black people who have no choice but to accept it.

Chapter 8: Tennessee Quotes

❝ At the auction block they tallied the souls purchased at each auction, and on the plantations the overseers preserved the names of workers in rows of tight cursive. Every name an asset, breathing capital, profit made flesh. The peculiar institution made Cora into a maker of lists as well. In her inventory of loss people were not reduced to sums but multiplied by their kindnesses. People she had loved, people who had helped her. The Hob women, Lovey, Martin and Ethel, Fletcher. The ones who disappeared: Caesar and Sam and Lumbly.

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie), Caesar, Lovey, Fletcher, Lumbly, Sam, Martin Wells, Ethel Wells (née Delany)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 215

Explanation and Analysis

Cora has been captured by Ridgeway, and is now traveling alongside him and his associates, Homer and Boseman. The ride is long, giving Cora a lot of time to reflect. She thinks in lists, imagining an "inventory" of people she has met. This passage highlights the way in which slavery infects people's minds, encouraging them to assign value to people as if they were objects. However, Cora distorts this way of thinking in a positive sense, turning it into a way of categorizing people's kindness. During her time on the run, Cora has often been forced to say goodbye to people before she had a chance to develop a real friendship or fully express her gratitude for their assistance. However, she treasures their

memories and honors the part they each played in attempting to transport her to freedom.

Chapter 10: Indiana Quotes

❝ How could such a bitter thing become a means of pleasure? Everything on Valentine was the opposite. Work needn't be suffering, it could unite folks. A bright child like Chester might thrive and prosper, as Molly and her friends did. A mother raise her daughter with love and kindness. A beautiful soul like Caesar could be anything he wanted here, all of them could be: own a spread, be a schoolteacher, fight for colored rights. Even be a poet. In her Georgia misery she had pictured freedom, and it had not looked like this. Freedom was a community laboring for something lovely and rare.

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie), Caesar, Chester, Molly

Related Themes:

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

Cora now lives on Valentine farm, a community of free black people who live and work together in Indiana. Cora lives in a cabin with a woman named Sybil and her daughter Molly, and she is moved by witnessing their relationship. She is also astonished by the way in which labor becomes something positive on Valentine, rather than a means of suffering and oppression. Cora's thoughts highlight the fact that from the outside, there are similarities between Valentine and a plantation. After all, both consist of a community of black people living and performing agricultural work together.

Of course, this similarity belies a fundamental and all-important difference: on the plantation, black people are forced to labor and are not allowed to receive any of the profits of their work. Enslaved people are under constant surveillance by cruel bosses, must adhere to cruel and arbitrary rules, and are forced to endure constant psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. On Valentine, residents work voluntarily and are free to enjoy the bounty of their labor. Perhaps more importantly, the community acts as a loving and cohesive whole, working in solidarity with one another to create "something lovely and rare."

❝ Cora had come to cherish the impossible treasures of the Valentine farm so completely that she'd forgotten how impossible they were. The farm and the adjacent ones operated by colored interests were too big, too prosperous. A pocket of blackness in the young state. Valentine's negro heritage became known years before. Some felt tricked that they'd treated a nigger as an equal and then to have that uppity nigger shame them with his success.

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie), John Valentine

Related Themes:

Page Number: 276

Explanation and Analysis

One day, while Cora is sitting in the library, John Valentine joins her and the two discuss the future of the farm. Some residents are arguing that the community should move west, while others advocate staying put but kicking out the runaways. Cora is anxious about this latter option, and has expressed her fears to John. While at first Cora had been resistant to feeling too at home at Valentine, she has now settled into life there and forgotten that the premise of the farm—black freedom, self-direction, and happiness—is "impossible" under white supremacy. These thoughts foreshadow Elijah Lander's speech later in the chapter, in which he encourages Valentine residents to embrace the "delusion" of Valentine, as this is their only hope of achieving freedom and joy in the midst of those who will do everything to destroy the possibility of black success.

❝ Seeing them all in one room, Cora got an idea of how large they were for the first time. There were people she'd never seen before, like the mischievous little boy who winked at her when their eyes met. Strangers but family, cousins but never introduced. She was surrounded by men and women who'd been born in Africa, or born in chains, who had freed themselves or escaped. Branded, beaten, raped. Now they were here. They were free and black and stewards of their own fates. It made her shiver.

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie), Homer

Page Number: 282

Explanation and Analysis

The residents of Valentine have gathered for a debate at which Elijah Lander and Mingo will speak about the future of the farm. It is the first time that Cora has seen all the

residents in the same place at the same time, and she is astonished by the community, which in some ways functions as a large and mutually supportive family. This passage functions as a meditation not only about Valentine itself, but also about the entire population of black people who live in America. As Lander will explore in his speech, there is little that actually connects the experiences of all black people in the United States—they originate from many different districts and tribes of the African continent, and many (such as John) are categorized as black even when they have mostly white ancestry.

The mention of the little black boy winking—who, unbeknownst to Cora, is actually Homer—is a reminder that not all black people choose to exist in solidarity with one another. However, it is inescapably true that all black people are united by the condition of being labeled "black" in America and by the ensuing oppression and subjugation they are forced to experience. At the same time, it is not just this negative experience that unites black people in the country—it is also their dream of freedom and their desire to be "stewards of their own fates." It is this sense of mutual fantasy and solidarity that makes possible a positive future for black people against all odds.

❝ We can't save everyone. But that doesn't mean we can't try. Sometimes a useful delusion is better than a useless truth. Nothing's going to grow in this mean cold, but we can still have flowers. Here's one delusion: that we can escape slavery. We can't. Its scars will never fade. When you saw your mother sold off, your father beaten, your sister abused by some boss or master, did you ever think you would sit here today, without chains, without the yoke, among a new family? Everything you ever knew told you that freedom was a trick-yet here you are. Still we run, tracking by the good full moon to sanctuary.

Valentine farm is a delusion. Who told you the negro deserved a place of refuge? Who told you that you had that right? Every minute of your life's suffering has argued otherwise. By every fact of history, it can't exist. This place must be a delusion, too. Yet here we are.

And America, too, is a delusion, the grandest one of all. The white race believes--believes with all its heart--that it is their right to take the land. To kill Indians. Make war. Enslave their brothers. This nation shouldn't exist, if there is any justice in the world, for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty. Yet here we are.

Related Characters: Elijah Lander (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

At the final meeting of Valentine residents, Mingo has argued for expelling the runaways and "criminals" that live on the farm in order to ensure the farm's survival and contribute to the project of racial uplift that he argues is only possible through cooperation with and deference to white people. However, in this passage Elijah Lander disputes Mingo's claims, arguing that while it is true that white supremacy casts black freedom as impossible, it is vital that the residents of Valentine cling on to this "delusion." Lander's distinction between useful and harmful delusions is crucial.

The whole foundation of America, in Lander's view, is a harmful delusion, which, in turn, creates harmful truths. Belief in the necessity and rightness of slavery has created the inescapable reality that no one in America can escape slavery and thus everyone must learn to deal with its consequences. However, this does not mean accepting that enslavement and oppression are the only possible conditions under which black people can live in America. By acknowledging the ugly reality of white supremacy, yet committing to the "impossible" project of black freedom, black people can build a picture of the future on their own terms, a future in which impossible fantasies eventually become reality.

Chapter 12: The North Quotes

❝ On Randall, on Valentine, Cora never joined the dancing circles. She shrank from the spinning bodies, afraid of another person so close, so uncontrolled. Men had put a fear in her, those years ago. Tonight, she told herself. Tonight I will hold him close, as if in a slow dance. As if it were just the two of them in the lonesome world, bound to each other until the end of the song.

Related Characters: Cora (aka Bessie), Arnold Ridgeway

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 302

Explanation and Analysis

Ridgeway and a gang of white men have descended on

Valentine, killing Lander, Royal, and many other residents. Ridgeway has captured Cora and forced her to lead him to the underground railroad station, which Homer overheard Royal mention in his dying words. As Cora shows Ridgeway the station, she draws nearer to him and loops her chains around his neck, holding him close as if they are dancing. This moment highlights Cora's fearlessness by showing that she has turned her former fears—of dance and of proximity to white men—into a weapon.

In a symbolic sense, Cora's decision to "dance" with Ridgeway shows that she understands fighting white supremacy requires exploiting white people's fears and the intimacy with black people on which they (secretly) depend. Furthermore, this passage illustrates the way in which Cora and Ridgeway are a kind of mythic pair of arch enemies whose survival ultimately depends on the death of the other.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: AJARRY

When Caesar first asks Cora to flee to the north, she says no; this refusal is related to the experiences of Cora's grandmother, Ajarry. Ajarry was kidnapped from Africa as a child along with her father (Cora's great grandfather), who was beheaded by slave traders. Ajarry is sold multiple times on the journey to Port Ouidah, before being forced onto a ship with people speaking a mix of languages (so as to avoid rebellion). Conditions on the ship are hellish; six weeks into the journey, Ajarry is gang-raped, and she attempts suicide twice. The remaining members of Ajarry's family have been sent to Bermuda. For the rest of her life, she imagines them working for kind masters and eventually living free up north. These fantasies comfort her, enabling her to endure the brutal reality of her life. In Charleston, Ajarry is sold again. She stands naked on the auction block, and eventually a man wearing a pristine white suit purchases her for $226. The man pinches Ajarry's breasts to check if she is going through puberty. She and the other slaves follow the man's buggy home through the night.

The novel opens by tracing Cora's heritage. Note that there are no details given about Ajarry's life of freedom in Africa, before she was kidnapped by slavers. This reflects the fact that African identity, history, and heritage were systematically erased by white slave-owners who punished slaves for speaking their own languages or engaging in traditional social and religious practices. This passage illustrates the multiple ways in which Ajarry responds to her captivity. At first, she tries to kill herself, recognizing that the only chance she has of freedom now lies in death. When her suicide attempts are unsuccessful she resorts to comforting herself through fantasies about her family; these fantasies become the only means by which Ajarry is able to endure her fate.

Ajarry is sold so many times "you would thought she was cursed." One of her masters goes bankrupt, another dies, and another loses her in a card game. Being sold so many times gives her a keen understanding of the dynamics of different plantations and helps her to survive. Ajarry also learns about how she and other "commodities" are valued and she comes to realize that her value determines her "possibilities." Finally, Ajarry ends up on Randall plantation, the "home" where she will live until her death. Ajarry is married three times. Her first husband drinks too much and is aggressive, and he is eventually sold; her second is a kind, religious man who dies of cholera. Her third husband has his ears bored as a punishment for stealing honey, and he dies from his injuries.

The story of Ajarry being repeatedly sold and traded and the account of her marriages highlight the way in which black life is treated as having no value beyond the financial. The "possibilities" to which Ajarry refers do not include the possibility of exercising agency or pursuing happiness; rather, Ajarry realizes that the higher her financial value, the more likely she is to survive. The deaths of Ajarry's second and third husbands emphasize that being a slave means being constantly surrounded by death.

Ajarry has five children; two die of fever, one of blood poisoning, and one is killed by a boss who hits him with a piece of wood. Ajarry is at least grateful that the children are not sold off. The only child who survives is Cora's mother, Mabel. Eventually, Ajarry dies from a brain hemorrhage while standing in the cotton fields. Ajarry feels that a lifetime in captivity is inevitable, that "liberty was reserved for other people." When Cora refuses to run away with Caesar, it is Ajarry "talking." Three weeks later, when Cora changes her mind, she is inhabiting the spirit of Mabel.

This passage introduces one of the key questions of the novel. Why do some enslaved people, like Ajarry, resign themselves to the idea that freedom is "reserved for other people," whereas others decide to risk their lives by seizing freedom for themselves? Ajarry's story suggests that the answer is complicated. Perhaps surprisingly, the fact that Ajarry knew freedom as a child does not make her more inclined to run away.

CHAPTER 2: GEORGIA

The chapter is preceded by a "runaway ad" from 1820 seeking the capture of an enslaved girl called Lizzie and warning people not to harbor her. The chapter begins with the narrator stating that Jockey (the oldest enslaved person on the plantation) is having a birthday, which comes once or twice a year and always on a Sunday, the slaves' half-day. Everyone attends the feast except those who have taken extra work. It would not be possible to use Jockey's birthday as an excuse not to work because "everybody knew niggers didn't have birthdays." Normally, Cora contributes something from her garden for the birthday feasts, but there is nothing in the soil today. Cora's friend Lovey asks which day she would choose if she could pick her birthday. Lovey is a simple young woman who enjoys dancing at the celebration days—birthdays, harvests, and Christmas. Cora doesn't dance. She replies that she has already told Lovey that she was born in winter, although she doesn't know the exact date and can only guess that she is about 15. Mabel used to tell Cora about her difficult delivery, in which Mabel almost bled to death. Cora tells Lovey that you can't pick your birthday, and Lovey replies that she better cheer up.

The celebration days play a complex role in life on the plantation. On one level, they provide rare moments of happiness for the enslaved population. Furthermore, characters like Jockey choose to find a positive aspect within the fact that enslaved people do not know their birthdays (and are even considered not to have them) by randomly choosing "birthdays" that coincide with half-days of work. Lovey is happy to buy into this excuse for a celebration and seize whatever joy she can through dance. Cora, however, has a different relationship to the celebration days. Although the narrator doesn't say so explicitly, it is clear that Cora finds the celebrations sinister, a way of subduing the enslaved population and suppressing any chance of rebellion.

With or without a feast, Cora spends every Sunday afternoon tending to her garden. Ajarry used to tend to it, before Randall plantation became as prosperous as it is now. Fourteen new cabins have been built since Ajarry's time, but it seems like they have been there forever. Just as white settlers "squabble" over land, so do enslaved people fight for small patches of earth to call their own. Mabel tells Cora that Ajarry defended her garden fiercely, threatening to hammer in the head of anyone who "so much as looked at it." This is hard for Cora to imagine, but she knows it must be true because the garden was passed down to Mabel. When Mabel runs away, Cora becomes a "stray." Although she is only ten or eleven, she decides to take over tending the garden. Ajarry had been well-respected among the enslaved population at Randall, but now everyone who knew Ajarry is dead, leaving Cora to fend for herself. Eventually, another woman named Ava grows resentful of Cora and strikes a deal to have Cora placed in Hob.

Plants and gardens often symbolize hope and the possibilities that come with new beginnings. Yet it is arguably incorrect to say that Cora's garden is a hopeful space. After all, there is little hope that Cora will ever escape the plantation and experience freedom and happiness for herself. Rather, the garden is more a symbol of survival, inheritance, and endurance. Three generations of her family have tended to it, and, as the story of Ajarry's husbands and children shows, the seemingly simple event of something being passed down through three generations of enslaved people is a miracle given the fact that slaves were systematically denied the rights to own property, live with their families, and often even to live.

Hob is where "the wretched" are exiled—enslaved people who have been "broken" either physically or mentally by the torture of plantation life. At first men lived in Hob, but now it is women, many of whom call out the names of their dead children in the night. Soon, an enslaved man named Old Abraham decides that it isn't right for Cora to have a small garden for herself. Not long after, a group of men arrive on the plantation, including Blake, an enormous man with a "miserable personality." Blake decides to tie up his dog in Cora's garden, and he builds the dog a little hut. Cora attempts to "call in a few debts owed to her mother" in order to get Blake to remove the dog, but everyone she approaches refuses. One morning, Cora wakes up to find her growing cabbages destroyed. The whole community watches to see how she will react. Furious, she takes a hatchet and destroys the doghouse, cutting off half the dog's tail in the process. Blake approaches her and at first it seems like there will be a conflict. However, the breakfast bell sounds and everyone disperses, not wanting to miss out.

Cora is an exile within the enslaved population of Randall plantation, making her exiled in a double sense: as a black enslaved person in a white supremacist country, and as a stigmatized "Hob woman" in the only community she has ever known. Furthermore, with her grandmother dead and her mother gone, Cora has no one around to look out for her. Cora's intense isolation makes her already unbearable life on Randall even worse. It also highlights the way in which slavery can drive enslaved people to treat one another in a selfish and vicious way. Life as an enslaved person is so brutal and survival is so difficult that there is often no choice but to look after one's own interests at the expense of others.

After this incident, Cora becomes the most "infamous" resident of Hob. While other Hob women are sold or commit suicide, Cora remains. Cora uses Blake's doghouse to store firewood, while Blake and other people in the community begin telling false stories about Cora that make her seem sinister and insane. Soon after Cora goes through puberty, she is gang-raped by four of the enslaved men on Randall. Three weeks prior, Blake had run away, but then he was caught. Cora might have felt that Blake deserved it, but his punishment was so awful it "made her shiver to think about."

Being exiled and perceived as "crazy" by the community has both advantages and disadvantages. Cora does not enjoy the protection or friendship of other members of the enslaved community at Randall (save the women of Hob, who are themselves exceptionally vulnerable). On the other hand, Cora's defiance allows her to store firewood in Blake's doghouse, and will eventually enable her to dream of running away.

Back at Jockey's birthday feast, the cook, Alice, asks Cora if she has brought anything from her garden. Cora tells her it's too early, and she remembers noticing that last year Alice threw the two cabbages she'd brought into the slop bucket. However, Alice is "beloved" of the Randall family, and thus there is no point in Cora confronting her. James Randall, who runs Cora's half of the plantation, is rather reserved, but his younger brother, Terrance, is aggressively cruel. There are no feast days permitted on Terrance's half. Where James is content with the stable profits produced by the plantation, Terrance is always scheming to find ways to make more money, including by growing more and more brutal toward the slaves. Cora sets up the children's race at Jockey's feast. She looks out for a boy called Chester, who is also a stray. He is already tall and strong, and Connelly, the overseer, has predicted he will grow up to be "a top picker." Chester runs fast, but Lovey always chooses her "favorites" as the winners. Cora assures Chester that he almost won.

The social dynamics of the enslaved community on Randall are far from simple. Each person looks out for their own interests, as well as for those they prioritize for one reason or another. While in another context such social dynamics might seem superficial or frivolous, for enslaved people they are essential to survival. This is because, lurking in the background of the lives of the enslaved population are the sinister designs of the Randall brothers and the other bosses. As is made clear in this passage, the behavior of both James and Terrance Randall is motivated by economic interests. Although the brothers possess different attitudes about running their respective halves of the plantation, both choose their approach on financial grounds.

Cora asks Jockey how old he is, recalling that at his last birthday he claimed to be a hundred. In fact he is only about fifty, but he is still the oldest enslaved person that anyone on Randall has ever met. Cora thinks she must be 16 or 17. It has been one year since Connelly told her to "take a husband," two since she was raped, and six since Mabel ran away. Since the rape Cora hasn't received any further attention from men because of her perceived "lunacy." Jockey is scarred and crippled, but in his old age the white overseers choose to leave him alone. Cora reflects on the fact that it might be her own birthday today without her realizing. While the rest of the crowd drifts off to eat, Caesar lingers and asks if he can talk to Cora. James Randall bought Caesar a year and a half ago; Cora has seen him carving wood and spending time with one of the housemaids. Caesar tells Cora that he is planning on running away to the north and that he wants Cora to come for "good luck." Cora finds the idea ludicrous, and tells Caesar she isn't trying to get herself killed.

This scene draws a distinct contrast between the kind of "freedom" Jockey is afforded as an old man and the kind Caesar seeks by running away. Because Jockey's life is unusually long for an enslaved person, in his old age he is given small permissions, such as being allowed to randomly choose birthdays for himself and to escape the harassment of the white men who run the plantation. However, Jockey's scars and injuries raise the question of what these minor freedoms actually mean for someone whose entire life has been defined by servitude and brutality. Clearly, Caesar believes that it is better to risk death than to live a long life as an enslaved man. Although Cora feels ambivalent about having a life like Jockey's, she still at first thinks Caesar is crazy to plan an escape.

Even after she returns to the rest of the crowd, Cora is still thinking about Caesar's "idiocy"; their brief conversation is the most that any man has spoken to her since she was moved to Hob. Wrestling matches take place, and Lovey comments that she would like to wrestle with a young man named Major. Following the wrestling comes the dancing, during which time the tensions of the community are eased. Through dance, members of the enslaved population are able to reconnect with one another as people, momentarily disregarding the disputes that arise as a result of the brutality to which they are subjected. Cora doesn't dance. She is anxious about the possibility of being touched by a man, even one with kind intentions. The music stops. Sometimes enslaved people can lose themselves in a temporary zone of freedom, such as while dancing, before being jerked back to reality.

Dancing is an important and beloved activity for the enslaved population, and thus Cora's unwillingness to participate further marks her as an outlier exiled from the community. There are several reasons why Cora does not like to dance. As the narrator mentions in this passage, her vulnerability as an unprotected teenage girl and the trauma of her rape make her uneasy about physical contact with men, even in the happy context of dance. Perhaps more fundamentally, however, Cora refuses to participate in an activity that can, however briefly, convince enslaved people that they are free.

The Randall brothers walk out of the house and into the crowd. The slaves step back and Jockey greets the brothers as "Master James" and "Master Terrance." Terrance says he doesn't want to disturb them, but that they heard the music and found it a "god-awful racket." The brothers are drinking wine from cut glass goblets and seem to be drunk. James doesn't spend a lot of time on the plantation and he rarely speaks to the slaves. Terrance, however, makes a point of interacting with the slaves and he rapes the women from his half of the plantation, boasting: "I like to taste my plums." He even sometimes visits newlywed slave couples on their wedding night to rape the bride before the marriage is consummated. James leaves the women of his half alone; James' valet gossips that James visits a brothel in New Orleans where he likes to be whipped by prostitutes.

Although Terrance is far crueler than James, the behavior of both brothers toward the slave population is governed by perversion. Terrance's sense of ownership of and entitlement to enslaved people causes him to violate every boundary of respect and decency. He takes sadistic pleasure in raping enslaved women and treating them as objects of his possession. James, meanwhile, seems to be ashamed by (or at least uninterested in) the reality of plantation life. This shame manifests itself in his masochistic desire to be whipped by prostitutes, just as the enslaved people on Randall are also whipped.

Terrance says he remembers James telling him about an enslaved boy on James' half of the plantation who could recite the Declaration of Independence. Moses, one of the bosses, informs the brothers that the boy in question, Michael, is dead. Michael had been taught by a former master to recite long passages of text. The master showed Michael off to guests, who would then discuss the unintelligence of black people. When Michael arrived on Randall, he had been mentally incapacitated by some unknown torture, and Connelly beat him to death. James is angry, saying he should have been informed of Michael's death. He turns to go, but Terrance insists on one more song. Terrance demands that the slaves dance, which they do, performing with vigor and joy that they do not really feel. Suddenly, Terrance roars in anger; Chester has bumped into him and splashed wine on his shirt. Terrance lifts his cane to beat Chester, and at that moment—despite all the unimaginable brutality she has been forced to passively witness over the years—Cora feels a sudden urge to bend over to shield Chester. Terrance beats both of them viciously.

This passage illustrates multiple different myths that define life during the slavery era. Michael's former master and other white people remain committed to the myth that black people are inherently unintelligent, even when presented with Michael's skill at memorization. Furthermore, the fact that it Terrance requests to hear the Declaration of Independence is significant. The Declaration is famous as a statement on human rights, which emphasizes equality and liberty. These ideas were directly contradicted, however, by the reality of slavery, which seriously undermines the idea that America is a country founded on freedom and equality for all. The final myth is the performance of happiness the slaves are forced to make while dancing for Terrance.

There are 7 women in Hob that year. One of them is prone to fits, and another two have been traumatized into a state of mental instability. Another two never speak; one of them has had her tongue cut out. Two other women have recently committed suicide, which is not unusual. This leaves Nag and Cora. Two weeks have passed since Jockey's birthday, and Cora's face has still not healed. Although Terrance's blows to her face were bad, the whipping she received the next day was much worse. Connelly has been at Randall a long time, and he was especially angered by what happened at Jockey's birthday. He was interrupted in the middle of raping an enslaved woman, and he whipped both Chester and Cora three days in a row, ordering that their wounds be doused in pepper water in between whippings. After this incident, Chester never speaks to Cora again. Cora collapses at the end of each work day, crippled by her injuries.

This passage explores what it actually means to endure the brutality of slavery. While rebellion means sadistic punishment and often death, endurance can mean the same thing. The woman of Hob have all been broken in various ways by the violence and trauma of slavery. Furthermore, the system of punishment that governs slavery discourages solidarity and mutual support, as Cora's punishment for shielding Chester shows. Due to the intensity of this brutality, enslaved people often have little choice but to turn away from one another, such as Chester does from Cora.

Before being placed in Hob, Nag was Connelly's favorite, "spending most nights in his bed." Nag was proud of her status as a favorite and was dedicated to her seduction of Connelly, even as he sent the children they had together to the other half of Randall. Once Connelly lost interest in Nag, she was moved to Hob. She takes care of Cora following her injuries, singing to her lost children "through" Cora. Cora suffers from dizziness and a terrible pain in her head. Nag worries about whether it would be worse for Cora to hide during Terrance's visit the next day, or appear and be visibly sick. James has fallen ill and there are rumors that Terrance will take over James' half of the plantation. That night, Cora sits outside, reflecting on the prospect of running away. Mabel never set foot outside Randall until the day she disappeared, never to return. One night, Cora fell asleep lying on Mabel's stomach and woke up never to see her again. An aggressive search effort was launched, but it came to nothing. Mabel was the only person to escape Randall successfully. Everyone else was caught and punished gruesomely before "being permitted to die."

Once again, life on Randall shows that social dynamics, connections, and preferences are a matter of life and death. While Nag is Connelly's "favorite," she enjoys a privileged and protected position herself. When Connelly rejects her, though, she becomes an exile and must live with the other outcasts in Hob. This passage also illustrates the way in which the traumatic separation of families under slavery creates new forms of attachment between enslaved people. When Nag looks after Cora, Cora becomes a substitute for the children that have been taken from Nag, and Nag becomes a substitute for Mabel, who abandoned Cora on the plantation.

Following Mabel's disappearance, Ridgeway, an "infamous slave catcher," visited Randall, accompanied by an associate wearing a necklace of shriveled ears. He returned two years later to apologize for his inability to catch Mabel and to let Old Randall know that there were rumors that the underground railroad was being extended into this part of the state, which Old Randall dismissed as nonsense. When Mabel left, she packed useful items like a machete, flint, and tinder. She left Cora the garden, which is Cora's "inheritance." Back in the present, Cora watches over her garden in the darkness. Terrance's visit the next day is mostly uneventful. Cora tries to hide from him in the fields, but he sees her and tips his cane at her. Two days later, James dies. Unlike Old Randall's funeral, which was overflowing with friends of the much-admired slave owner, James' funeral is "sparsely attended."

Slave owners and their allies do everything they can to convince the enslaved population that they are in total control and that any person who runs faces certain death. However, a few details in this passage disprove this myth of control. Not only does Mabel escape without being noticed or apprehended, but after a two year search Ridgeway is forced to admit that she has escaped his grasp completely. Ridgeway's news about the underground railroad further confirms that the power of slaveholders is being threatened. Although Old Randall is dismissive of the news, his nonchalance cannot change reality.

The fact that Terrance is taking over the entire plantation seems as good a reason as any to attempt an escape, and an enslaved man called Big Anthony seizes the moment to do so. He is the first person to run away since Mabel, and he makes it 26 miles before being caught and returned in an iron cage. On the night that Big Anthony's punishment begins, Caesar comes to visit Cora at Hob, and Cora takes him to talk in the abandoned, rotting schoolhouse. Although previously Cora thought Caesar was "a fool," now he strikes her as mature and wise. He asks her again if she will come north with him, and Cora is puzzled. When Caesar was forced to watch Cora being whipped, rather than turning his head away (as others did) he kept a steady gaze. Caesar comments that life on Randall is about to get "bad." Terrance ordered new, ornately engraved stocks to be constructed for Big Anthony. On the second day of Anthony's punishment, Terrance entertained guests who sat outside and ate lunch while Anthony was whipped in front of them. On the third day, the slaves were forced to watch as Anthony was covered in oil and burned alive, although they could not hear him scream because on the first day his penis had been cut off and sewn into his mouth.

More than any other moment in the narrative, Big Anthony's failed escape attempt, capture, and punishment demonstrate why so many enslaved people did not consider running away. The monstrous brutality with which Big Anthony is treated is clearly not motivated solely out of vengeance for Anthony's having dared to rebel (although this is undoubtedly a factor). Rather, the punishment is intended to deter other enslaved people from even dreaming of running away. Instead of a life of peace and freedom, slaves are forced to associate escape with the image of Big Anthony being burned alive in the stocks. Cora mentions that it is conventional for slaves to look away as much as possible when they are made to watch someone be punished. The fact that Caesar refuses to look away during Cora's whipping highlights Caesar's defiant courage and unwillingness to ignore or brush aside the reality of slavery.

While Big Anthony burns, Terrance addresses the slaves, explaining that the plantation will now function as one whole, rather than two halves. He adds that the cotton will be rearranged to make picking more efficient and that each slave's required quota will be increased. As he walks back and forth, he slaps a man who is crying at the sight of Big Anthony and squeezes Cora's breast underneath her dress. Terrance explains that all feasts are banned except Christmas and Easter and that there will be a tax on any extra work performed on other plantations. Cora feels that now she truly belongs to Terrance; she tries to conjure the stories she has heard about the world beyond Randall in her mind, but they are elusive. She decides she must see it for herself. After Terrance's speech, Cora goes to Caesar and behaves as if she had agreed to the escape plan all along.

This passage returns to the question of what enslaved people can bring themselves to endure, and under what circumstances a person is pushed to the point of absolute refusal and rebellion. What is it that drives Cora to this point of no return—the punishment of Big Anthony? Terrance groping her breast? Or is it simply the realization that she cannot truly imagine a world outside of Randall? The ambiguity of Cora's exact reasoning speaks to a major theme in the history of slave rebellion: the question of whether horror at slavery or the desire for freedom exert a greater power over the mindset of individuals.

Caesar was born on a small farm in Virginia owned by a mild-mannered widow, Mrs. Garner, who entrusted Caesar and his father with running the farm and Caesar's mother with the household. Mrs. Garner believed slavery was a "necessary evil," that black people were inherently unintelligent, and that abolishing slavery would leave black people helpless in their incompetence. At the same time, she also taught her slaves to read, let them leave the farm with some regularity, and promised to free them upon her death. Yet when Mrs. Garner died, a local lawyer acting on behalf of her niece arranged for them to be sold south, and Caesar never saw his family again. Caesar explains to Cora that he takes trips to town to sell wooden crafts that he carves in his spare time. One day he met Mr. Fletcher, a white man from Pennsylvania who hated slavery and who had noticed Caesar could read. The two began to meet regularly; Fletcher explained that most people thought the underground railroad didn't run this far south, but that Fletcher knew of a station where he could transport Caesar.

Like Cora, Caesar has also "inherited" the idea of escape, although under much different circumstances. Mrs. Garner's relatively mild behavior towards Caesar and his family encouraged Caesar to feel that freedom was more tangible than it has ever seemed to Cora. Furthermore, Mrs. Garner's promise to liberate Caesar and his family upon her death further confirmed to Caesar that freedom was something that awaited him in the future. The phenomenon of slaves being sold even after their masters had promised to free them at their deaths was extremely common, one of the many injustices that comprised the immorality of slavery. For some, such a monumental disappointment was too much to bear and broke them completely. Caesar, however, remains determined to seize the freedom he is owed.

Caesar admits that Fletcher has never helped a slave get to the underground railroad before, but he assures Cora that Fletcher is an honest man. On her last night in Hob, Cora cannot sleep and thinks about her mother. Mabel is a mystery, and Cora feels sad and resentful that she left without even a veiled goodbye. The next day, Cora furiously digs at the earth as if she is building a tunnel. She attempts to say goodbye without revealing that she is leaving by saying kind words to Lovey and having a final meal with the Hob women. Cora leaves behind her few small possessions and packs a hatchet, flint, and tinder. She digs up the yams from her garden, just as Mabel did before her. Caesar and Cora meet by the cotton and set off at a quick speed, knowing they have six hours at most before someone notices their absence.

Cora feels sad and angry about Mabel's departure, yet ends up following in her mother's footsteps by taking the exact same items with her that Mabel did. Furthermore, although Cora feels sure that Mabel did not say goodbye, Cora was only a child at the time and thus likely would not have understood even if Mabel had made some kind of gesture or signal. It was imperative that Cora had no idea that Mabel was leaving, otherwise she likely would have ruined her escape. Worse, Cora could have been tortured into a confession over Mabel's whereabouts by the bosses at Randall.

Cora and Caesar enter a swamp, and soon after they hear a voice—it is Lovey. She tells them she knew they were "up to something." Caesar says that Fletcher won't take them all, but they realize that they can't send Lovey back now. Cora is surprised by Lovey's rebellion, but in reality every enslaved person harbors dreams of freedom. Cora is similarly stunned by Caesar's ability to navigate his way using the stars. The items Lovey brings are of no practical use, just small treasures she has collected. The three of them become covered in mud, insect bites, and scratches. Cora asks Lovey what her mother, Jeer, will do when she discovers Lovey is missing. Jeer was born in Africa and used to tell stories about life in her village there. Lovey tells Cora that Jeer will be proud of her. Eventually, they reach the end of the swamp; however, shortly after they are apprehended by some hog hunters who had been alerted about their escape. Caesar fights viciously and Lovey howls as she is dragged off. Cora, meanwhile, is tackled by a young and slender boy, whose touch reminds her of the night she was raped. She smashes a rock over his skull and is joined by Caesar. They run off together without saying a word.

Cora's surprise at Lovey's willingness to take such a great risk by running away suggests that Cora does not understand that Lovey, too, has inherited the dream of freedom through her mother. Whereas Mabel never knew anything of the world beyond Randall, Jeer still had memories of Africa, which became a kind of myth that allowed other enslaved people to dream of freedom and a world completely unlike the plantation. Lovey's naïve choice of possessions and more straightforward relationship to her mother create the impression that she is more childlike than Cora and Caesar. This is confirmed when Lovey is dragged off while Cora and Caesar successfully manage to fight off the men who apprehend them. Lovey's abduction is thus the loss of an innocent, a fact that hardens Caesar and Cora as they continue on their journey.

Cora and Caesar confirm that neither of them mentioned the underground railroad to Lovey. They arrive at Fletcher's house, and he explains that Jeer noticed Lovey was missing and went looking for her, which in turn alerted the bosses, who instigated a large-scale manhunt. After being captured by the hog hunters, Lovey was returned to Randall. The boy who apprehended Cora—who was only 12—died after Cora struck him with the rock, making the white men even more desperate for vengeance. Caesar and Fletcher discuss their next steps, and decide that Fletcher will drive his cart to the next station, with Caesar and Cora hiding underneath a blanket. As they travel through town, Cora panics at the thought of being caught—Fletcher will almost certainly be lynched and Cora and Caesar will be returned to Randall for a punishment worse than Big Anthony's. She goes to sleep to avoid thinking about Lovey.

The fact that it was Jeer who alerted the white men to the runaways' disappearance shows that family connections can be a liability as much as they can also be a source of strength and inspiration. The incident with the hog farmers and the events that follow create a thunderstorm of emotion that completely overwhelms Cora. She is simultaneously terrified of being captured again, devastated that Lovey was taken, resentful of Lovey for putting them in danger, shocked by the death of the boy, angry at the white men who are hunting her and Caesar, and astonished by her experience of the world beyond Randall.

When Cora awakens, they enter a barn with thousands of shackles hanging from the wall. Some of the shackles are small and thin, designed for children. Fletcher introduces Cora and Caesar to a white man with a strange accent named Lumbly. Lumbly explains that when he is not attending to the underground railroad, he leads a "quiet life" on his farm. Fletcher says goodbye and embraces Cora, who flinches, not wanting to be touched by a white man. Lumbly leads Cora and Caesar through a trapdoor and down a foul-smelling staircase. They finally reach the railroad tunnel, which astonishes Caesar and Cora. When they ask who built it, Lumbly responds: "Who builds anything in this country?" He explains that there is one train leaving in one hour and another leaving in six; they are headed in different directions. Lumbly insists that he cannot fully explain the details of either route. Cora thinks of the black people who built the tunnel and wonders if they received their "proper reward."

Some critics of the novel have pointed out that the underground railroad was, in many cases, not an actual railroad at all but more a network of houses, people, and secret routes to the north. However, in some places the railroad was literal, rather than only a metaphor. By including a physical railroad in the book, Whitehead emphasizes the role of black people themselves in constructing their own passage to freedom. Whereas under slavery black people were forced to engage in labor and construction from which they did not personally benefit, in building the underground railroad—in both the literal and metaphorical sense—black people were able to achieve ownership of their work.

Lumbly explains that each state is unique, and that by traveling through different states it is possible to get a full picture of America. The train arrives and Cora and Caesar climb in. The car is in a bad state and Cora worries that it will fall apart. Caesar falls asleep and Cora stares through the slats of the car, but can see only darkness. They arrive in South Carolina in the sunlight, and Cora is astonished to see a skyscraper.

The juxtaposition of the ramshackle train car and the skyscraper in South Carolina emphasizes Lumbly's point that America—rather than being a unified and consistent whole—is instead a patchwork nation consisting of many very different worlds, each of which seem to exist in a different period of history.

CHAPTER 3: RIDGEWAY

Ridgeway's father was a blacksmith who had a "half-breed" friend called Tom Bird. When drunk, Tom would talk about the "Great Spirit" that connects everything on Earth. Ridgeway's father was not religious, but felt that the spirit was present in metalwork, and would tell Ridgeway to "work that spirit." Young Ridgeway felt disdainful of the other men in town and unsure of the kind of person he wanted to become. Ridgeway was only 14 when he joined the patrollers who rounded up runaway slaves, seeking to suppress any chance of a rebellion like those taking place in the West Indies and elsewhere in the South. Ridgeway idolizes a fierce and brutal patroller who is jailed more often than the people he persecutes. Patrolling is a simple task; they stop and harass every black person they see, and are always excited when news of a runaway comes out. They relish the chance to smash the possessions of freedmen and rape black women.

Here Whitehead explores a new moral question: how does a man like Ridgeway come to be so cruel and sadistic? Through exploring Ridgeway's childhood, Whitehead illustrates the different factors that influenced Ridgeway to grow into a brutal agent of white supremacy. Crucially, it is not the case that Ridgeway was only surrounded by other white men who hated black people and had a thirst for violence. Rather, his father was a craftsman who took pleasure in his trade, and who was friends with a mixed-race man with an empathetic, spiritual view of the world. Ridgeway's disdain for these men drew him to idolize the patrollers, even though they were prone to destructive, criminal behavior.

Ridgeway's father is disapproving of his son's chosen line of work, but Ridgeway—who is now 18—replies that both father and son are now "working for Mr. Eli Whitney." The invention of the cotton gin means more profit, more slaves, and more iron required for tools, machines, and chains. The reward for a captured slave is anywhere from two to hundreds of dollars, depending on the slave's condition and the master's wealth. Ridgeway travels north to catch escaped slaves and is astonished by the size and variety of buildings there. He captures an enslaved woman who escaped to New Jersey via the underground railroad and who offers to sleep with him in exchange for her freedom. After Ridgeway loses his virginity to her, he shackles her and returns her to her former master's mansion in Virginia. Ridgeway quickly learns the best methods for finding runaways, including collaborating with freemen and others such as dockhands and clerks. Ridgeway grows rich and builds a reputation as a vicious slave catcher.

Ridgeway's comment about Eli Whitney, the inventor of the cotton gin, emphasizes the idea that the brutality of slavery and white supremacy were governed by economic interests. Ridgeway's father feels morally superior to his son because he is simply a craftsman rather than someone who personally profits from violence against African Americans. However, Ridgeway points out that this is false—his father makes money from constructing the chains in which slaves are held and the tools with which they are forced to labor. The description of Ridgeway's emerging career as a slave catcher shows that his desire for profit and success erases any sense of morality. To Ridgeway, black people are nothing more than currency.

New York is teeming with abolitionist activity and has strict laws preventing freemen from being taken back into slavery; however, through quick action and bribery, Ridgeway is able to kidnap many freemen "before the abolitionists had even gotten out of bed." Ridgeway watches immigrants from Europe arrive in ships and thinks that they are hardly better than black people, comparing them to garbage. However, he feels assured that the system of white supremacy will eventually bestow on these new arrivals the privileges and sense of ownership that he believes white people deserve. He feels that the true "Great Spirit" is the mandate of property ownership: "if you can keep it, it's yours." Ridgeway's father dies and Ridgeway returns to the South, where many plantations have doubled in size. Here there is no underground railroad and there are far fewer lawyers and abolitionists to hinder Ridgeway's hunt.

Ridgeway's generally misanthropic personality is deeply entwined with his particular hatred of black people. His impression of the newly-arrived European immigrants aligns with theories about the emergence of whiteness as a racial category in the United States. Scholars have pointed out that, through much of American history, many European groups (such as Italian and Irish people) were not considered "white." It was only through the racial hierarchy that placed black people at the bottom that European immigrants were eventually "assimilated" into whiteness in order to prevent them from allying with black people.

On his way back down south, Ridgeway and his gang, wearing the white hoods of the Ku Klux Klan, descend upon the house of an abolitionist named August Carter. They brutally beat Carter, rape his wife, and burn his house down. At this point Ridgeway has developed a fearsome reputation among slaves and slave owners alike. Ridgeway remains troubled for years over his inability to capture Mabel, and thus the chance to chase down Cora fills him with determination. He vows to find and destroy the part of the underground railroad that has somehow made it into Georgia.

Ridgeway seems to despise white abolitionists just as much as he hates black people. To Ridgeway, there is nothing worse than a "race traitor" who seeks to undermine the strict hierarchy of white supremacy. Note that although Ridgeway is motivated by a belief in property ownership and desire for financial gain, he also feels personally implicated in the successes and failures of his slave catching business.

CHAPTER 4: SOUTH CAROLINA

The chapter is preceded by another runaway slave ad, this time for an 18-year-old "yellow Negro girl" who ran away nine months ago and who is suspected of "attempting to pass as a free person." The main narrative then begins with a description of the "lovely clapboard house" of the Anderson family: Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, their two children, and their nanny, Bessie, who cannot read or write. Mrs. Anderson is a philanthropist who is raising money for a new hospital. Bessie lives in dormitories a short walk from the Andersons' house. She enjoys walking through Main Street and eyeing the colorful shop window displays. She particularly loves the 12-story Griffin Building, one of the tallest in the whole country. This is where Mr. Anderson works, and Bessie was thrilled to take the children to visit him and thrilled (and frightened) to ride up to the eighth floor in the elevator. Mr. Anderson works in contracts for the cotton industry. He was pleased by the children's visit, but seemed anxious to return to his work.

In comparison to the previous chapter, the opening description of South Carolina reads as something of a dream, simultaneously modern and idyllic. The happy Anderson family, the bustling activity of Main Street, and the impressive Griffin Building all indicate a sense of progress and achievement. While Bessie is a (presumably black) woman employed by a (presumably white) family, her relationship to the Andersons differs greatly from the dynamic between masters and slaves illustrated in the previous chapters. Bessie lives in a separate dormitory, comes and goes unsupervised by white people, and seems to enjoy a pleasant enough relationship with the white family she works for. However, Mr. Anderson's job shows that he, too, directly profits from the brutality of the slave trade.

Bessie is able to walk through town "as a free woman," although she is careful to avoid the saloons and neighborhoods where poorer white people live. The dormitories where she lives are newly-built red brick buildings with spotless interiors. Only half of the black residents work on Saturdays, and many are nannies like Bessie. She sleeps in a room with eighty beds. She takes out a blue dress that she bought soon after arriving in South Carolina—she treasures this dress. On Saturdays she lets herself sleep in before attending classes and then doing her own chores. Supper is chicken and roast potatoes made by Margaret, another dormitory resident. On her way back upstairs, Bessie runs into Miss Lucy, a white proctor with a "severe aspect" but "quick smile." Miss Lucy corrects Bessie on her speech, encouraging her to replace her African-American dialect with "proper" English. She tells Bessie that she's making "splendid progress" and bows to her on her way out, which still stuns Bessie.

On the surface, Bessie's life in the dormitories and her interaction with Miss Lucy suggest that she enjoys the privileges of a free and equal citizen. However, on closer inspection this is not the case. Living in the dormitory may be comfortable, but it is also infantilizing, and the fact that Bessie shares a room with 79 women does not seem particularly pleasant. Furthermore, although Miss Lucy is polite to Bessie, she also encourages her to erase aspects of her identity that mark her as black. Bessie clearly still occupies a subservient role, as revealed by the fact that she calls the proctor "Miss Lucy" and obediently follows all her corrections.

Cora was given the name Bessie Carpenter when she arrived from Georgia. The train journey felt dangerous, and Cora clung to Caesar as the car shook. When they arrived, they were greeted by a white man named Sam who brought them food and promised them that South Carolina had a more "enlightened attitude" towards black people than other parts of the South. He advised that it might take some time for them to figure out their next escape route, and that they might even want to stay in South Carolina. Cora was able to wash and was given a blue dress made of soft cotton. Looking at the papers they'd been given, Caesar pointed out that the papers said he and Cora were "property of the United States government"; however, Sam brushed this off as a "technicality," explaining that the government bought off slaves in large numbers in order to encourage migration to the cities. Caesar and Cora memorized their story: Christian and Bessie had been bought by the government in a bankruptcy case. They realize that they also need to learn to "walk like freedmen." Over time, Cora adapts her posture and diligently studies reading and writing.

At first glance, Cora and Caesar's life in South seems to be idyllic. They are able to live in comfort and dignity, with access to resources (such as education) that are strictly denied to enslaved people. Cora's astonishment at the soft cotton of her dress highlights a particular hypocrisy of slavery—while slaves are worked to death in order to harvest cotton, most never even get to touch the final product of soft cotton clothing. However, once again there are indications that Cora and Caesar's life in South Carolina may not be quite as wonderful as it appears on the surface. Although they enjoy many of the benefits of freemen, they are still technically owned by the United States government. While Sam assures them that this is nothing to worry about, it will soon turn out that Caesar is right to be suspicious of this arrangement.

Miss Handler, Cora's teacher, is relentlessly patient even with an old man in Cora's class who "sputtered and choked" through the lesson. Mabel used to explain to Cora that the "half-language" spoken by enslaved people who blend African mother tongues and slave dialect is "the language of the plantation." Miss Handler explains that this class would be illegal in North Carolina, and that they would all be whipped (or worse) as punishment. Cora remembers that Connelly once gouged out the eyes of an enslaved man who merely looked at words. She thinks that Mabel would be proud of her for learning to read. Cora is still desperate to learn what happened to Mabel, and one day she decides to ask Miss Lucy if she has any record of Mabel Randall. Lucy points out that Cora's last name is Carpenter, but Cora lies that this was her father's surname and that her mother is a Randall. Lucy promises to check the statewide records in the Griffin Building. This moment was an anomaly, however; in general, Cora tries not to think about Mabel, and when she does she feels full of rage.

Cora's conflicting feelings about Mabel speak to both the universal complexity of relationships between mothers and children and the specific devastation caused by slavery. The book illustrates the way in which slavery tears families apart in a direct, deliberate way—such as when relatives are sold off separately from one another—and in an indirect manner, by placing enslaved people under such horrific conditions that they are often forced to act in selfish ways in order to survive. Thus Cora's more conventional feelings about her mother—such as her hope that Mabel would be proud of her—are interwoven with feelings of rage, resentment, and shock that Mabel chose to abandon her.

After her meeting with Miss Lucy, Cora is so overcome by emotion that another dormitory resident asks if she is alright. Cora resolves to be better at hiding her feelings, although she is generally very adept at maintaining her identity as "Bessie." When she first arrived at the dormitories, she was subjected to a quick interview in order to place her in a job, as well as an assessment by Dr. Campbell, whose steel instruments frightened Cora, reminding her of the tools used for torture on the plantation. Dr. Campbell asked her questions about her ancestry and health. During the physical examination, Dr. Campbell was able to guess the number of lashes she'd received almost to the exact number, and he realized from the genital examination that she'd been raped. Cora feels nervous and humiliated, but she answers his questions honestly. Finally, Dr. Campbell takes a sample of her blood.

The clinical and orderly doctor's office may seem far less horrific than the horrors Cora was subjected to on the plantation—however, this passage highlights that the doctor's probing is itself another form of violence. Although Dr. Campbell does not intentionally antagonize Cora, he forces her to relive her existing traumas through both his verbal and physical examinations. Furthermore, Dr. Campbell's clinical manner provides Cora little emotional support as her psychic wounds are re-opened. Perhaps worst of all, he does not fully explain why the examination is happening, making his actions exploitative and a violation.

Back in the present, it is almost time for the social, and Cora puts on her beloved blue dress. When she first arrived in South Carolina, she was shocked to find that items in the "colored emporium" were marked up to two or three times the price of goods sold to white people. Cora is careful with money; most of her wages are deducted by the town for food and accommodation. It is possible to get credit through "scrip," but Cora is wary of getting into debt. On the green, she spies Caesar, who looks older and has grown a mustache. He gives her a bouquet of flowers. A month after they arrived in South Carolina he tried to kiss her and she refused, but now she thinks that perhaps one day she will kiss him. The proctors organize socials in order to encourage socialization between the black men and women who live in the dormitories and "undo some of the damage" of slavery. There is music, dancing, food, and drink. Caesar works in a factory, a job he finds "unexpectedly fulfilling." He enjoys being able to witness the product at every stage of its development, from a pile of parts to a finished item.

The social invites comparison to Jockey's birthday celebration. In many ways, the two events could not be more different. The social is a genuinely pleasant and joyful affair, with attendees free to engage in activities safe from the threatening gaze of white people. The comfort and autonomy of Cora and Caesar's new lives are symbolized by objects such as Cora's dress, Caesar's mustache, and the bouquet of flowers. However, there are also similarities between the social and Jockey's feast. Both involve the same activities—eating, drinking, music, and dancing. And whereas the social is organized by the white proctors, the black community at Randall organized Jockey's feast themselves. Life in the dormitories is pleasant, but it is still controlled by white people.

Cora asks Caesar about Sam, and Caesar mentions that there is a train leaving in a few days, which they can take if they want to. Since arriving, Caesar has grown happy about the prospect of staying put, while Cora has wanted to continue their journey. Sam, emphasizing the state's "enlightened" racial attitude, has remained enthusiastic about the pair's prospects in South Carolina. Eventually, Cora comes around to the idea of staying. She changes her mind after finishing a delicious dormitory meal and feeling anxious about the prospect of starving again while on the run. As the dormitory residents dance, Cora and Caesar decide to stay. On the way home from the social, Cora sees a young woman running over the green, her blouse flapping open to reveal her breasts. Two men grab her and gently subdue her, while the woman screams: "My babies! They're taking away my babies!" The black people looking on have seen a similar picture many times before—a mother distraught as her children are sold to a different master. That night, Cora is haunted by the woman's screams, even as she feels reassured by the decision to stay.

Once again, Cora and Caesar are faced with a difficult choice between endurance and rebellion. Although life in South Carolina is infinitely more bearable than conditions on the plantation, Cora and Caesar have still sacrificed their dream of true freedom in the north for a sheltered, somewhat infantilized existence in South Carolina. They remain in dangerous proximity to Georgia and are locked into an arrangement that leaves them with little autonomy over their lives, even if they also have comparatively little to worry about. The woman screaming is the first sign of rebellion Cora witnesses in South Carolina, as well as the first sign that there may be more sinister realities lying beneath the idyllic surface of the dormitory.

Miss Lucy tells Cora that she has been given a new placement at a museum. Cora asks Lucy about the screaming woman she saw on the green, and Lucy explains that she is a resident of number 40, the dormitory reserved for "residents with nervous disorders." Forgetting herself, Cora remarks that 40 is "your Hob." Cora is sad to leave the Andersons, who were kind employers. At the museum, Cora is introduced to Mr. Field, the "curator of Living History." Cora assumes she was hired as a cleaner, but Mr. Field explains that visitors come to the museum to see the full variety of the American landscape and its people, "people like you." The first room Cora poses in is called "Scenes from Darkest Africa," which depicts rural village life. The next is "Life on the Slave Ship," where Cora poses as an African boy turned sailor next to a white figure made of wax. In the final room "Typical Day on the Plantation," Cora sits at a spinning wheel. She points out to Mr. Field that the room does not accurately represent plantation life, but he responds that he does not have the resources to make the scenes as accurate as he would like.

Try as she might, Cora cannot seem to leave behind life on the plantation. The first indication of this is her association of number 40 with Hob, which partially explains why she is so haunted by the screams of the woman. The connection between Randall and life in South Carolina is made more explicit when Cora is hired at the museum to pose in scenes from different parts of the slave trade. As Cora immediately realizes, these scenes present a completely inaccurate, idealized view of slavery, one that fails to represent the brutal reality of the lives of enslaved people. However, when she points this out to Mr. Field, he misunderstands her critique. This misinterpretation reveals that Mr. Field feels no obligation to accurately present the violent, torturous reality of slavery, which white visitors, we can assume, do not want to see.

One realistic element of the plantation scene is the coarse "Negro cloth" Cora is forced to wear, which makes her feel intensely ashamed. There are two other "types" employed to pose in the scenes, two black women named Isis and Betty. Betty tells the others that she likes the fact that Mr. Field never shows his temper, unlike her previous employers. The museum visitors, however, are not so respectful—they bang on the glass and make rude comments. The exhibits open on the same day as the new hospital. Cora and the other dormitory residents are regularly monitored by the doctors, and Miss Lucy explains that their findings will be used to understand "colored life." Cora goes into an appointment with a new doctor, Dr. Stevens, who is kinder than Dr. Campbell. After the examination, Dr. Stevens asks if Cora has considered birth control. Cora, alarmed, asks what will happen if she refuses. Dr. Stevens explains that it's mandatory for some black women in South Carolina to be sterilized, such as those who have already had two children and the mentally ill, but that for Cora, it is simply a chance to "take control over [her] own destiny."

As the feelings of relief over her escape from plantation life fade, Cora is made aware of more and more trials that she must endure as part of her new life in South Carolina. Working in the museum may be safe and predictable, but it is also humiliating. Her encounter with Dr. Stevens leaves her with a similar sense that she has been exploited, violated, and humiliated. On the other hand, Cora is also more confrontational (particularly around white people) than she used to be. The fact that she immediately asks Dr. Stevens what will happen if she refuses to go on birth control illuminates the notion that she still harbors a powerful inclination for rebellion. Cora is determined to maintain control over her destiny, which she knows means refusing birth control.

Cora leaves the hospital feeling dizzy and furious with the idea that some women are forced to take birth control simply because they are deemed mentally "unfit." She walks to the Andersons' house and accidentally introduces herself as Cora to the girl who answers the door, before correcting herself. The girl tells her Mrs. Anderson and the children are out and that she should come back when they are home. Two weeks later, Mr. Field gives Cora, Isis, and Betty a tour of the whole museum. All the white figures in the exhibits are made of wax; she and the other girls are the only living "types." The exhibits tell stories of different moments in American history, from pre-colonial Native Americans to the Boston Tea Party. Back in her own exhibit, Cora asks the sailor dummy, Skipper John, if this is "the truth of our historic encounter." Cora thinks about the reality of life as an enslaved person, and realizes that no one seems to want to know the truth, particularly not the white museum visitors. She recalls hearing Michael recite the Declaration of Independence; even then, she knew that the line about all men being "created equal" was false in a country built by slavery on stolen land.

In the moments following Dr. Stevens' revelation, the "dream" of life in South Carolina quickly turns into a nightmare. Cora feels shocked and panicked by the sinister truths lying beneath the surface of her comfortable, pleasant existence in the dormitories. Cora's decision to walk to the Andersons' house seems motivated by a desire to tell someone what she has just discovered so that they, too, can wake up from the dream. However, this seems more like a momentary lapse of judgment (akin to the slip of introducing herself as "Cora") than a serious solution. Later, in the museum, Cora realizes that the white people in South Carolina do not want to know the truth about what is happening around them, particularly when it comes to the brutality and violence exerted on black people.

Soon after, Cora notices that the lights in number 40 are out, and someone explains that the women have moved to the new hospital to "get better." An hour before Cora goes to meet Caesar and Sam, she manages to get through an unlocked door to the roof of the Griffin Building. Cora looks out at the town, which is in various states of construction, and wonders if the Griffin Building is as tall as the pyramids built by slaves in Egypt. She wonders if she will one day live in a cottage on a street in the town that hasn't been built yet. Cora isn't sure why Sam has summoned her and Caesar. When she arrives, Caesar is already there, drinking an ale and wearing a new dark suit that suits him. Sam tells them that there is a train coming in a few days; he knows they have decided to stay, but thinks they might change their minds after hearing what he has to say.

Cora's life seems to finally have reached a degree of comfort, security, and peace. Not only does she feel somewhat settled in South Carolina in the present, but she is even able to imagine a future for herself there—something beyond the imaginative capacity of most enslaved people, who are never able to feel that they belong anywhere or that they will even survive for long. Of course, it is just at this moment that Sam reveals information that he believes will change Cora and Caesar's minds about staying in South Carolina. For black people in America, it is difficult to feel like anywhere is truly home. The fact that the town in South Carolina is only ever called "the town" in the book further emphasizes this idea: as even this place that Cora has come to know to an extent is still aonymous to her.

Sam explains that one of his regular patrons at the saloon, Bertram, is a doctor who has recently been hired at the new hospital. Recently, Bertram was drunk and warned Sam not to go to Red's, the parlor with black prostitutes; this is because the black people who think they're receiving blood treatment at the hospital are in fact being purposefully infected with syphilis for medical research. There are also other research trials being run at the hospital, including studies to better understand the physical and mental traits of different African tribes. The idea is that this knowledge will prevent the suicide of enslaved people or the rape of white women by black men. Bertram adds that strategic sterilization of people with the most rebellious ancestry will allow white people to eventually free the enslaved without worrying about being killed in revenge. Cora says that they must tell everyone living in the dormitories that they're being lied to, but Sam points out that people will trust the white doctors over the three of them.

The research being conducted on the dormitory residents is an example of how the seemingly neutral (or positive) pursuits of knowledge, medicine can become sinister and violent through being designed to advantage white people at the expense of African Americans. There is a long history of both enslaved and free black people being used for medical research against their will. The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment (on which the syphilis trials in the novel are based) actually took place, in the twentieth century, which shows that even many years after the abolition of slavery and ostensible mitigation of white supremacy, black people were still violated in the name of scientific research.

Cora suddenly remembers the woman who ran across the green screaming, "They're taking away my babies," and suddenly, she realizes that the woman knew she was being sterilized against her will. Caesar says he must warn Meg, a friend he's been "spending time with," because she sometimes goes to Red's. The three of them struggle to decide the right course of action; Caesar suggests that even these horrors are better than what the dormitory residents have escaped on the plantation. That night, Cora sleeps badly, tormented by the fact that she and the other black residents thought they were free of white people's control but are in fact still being treated like farm animals. The next day, Isis asks Cora if they can swap rooms at the museum because she is feeling unwell. Cora usually likes to get the plantation room over with first and end her day in Scenes from Darkest Africa, which makes her feel calm. Cora hates being under the constant supervision of the white people who visit the museum. She has taken to glaring at the visitors, picking the "weak links" to stare at. The targets always break away, unable to hold her gaze. On this day, she sees the Andersons' little girl looking and thinks, "I'll break you, too."

In this passage, Cora realizes how deeply the treatment of black people as property is built into the fabric of American society. Even in situations where white people are behaving in an ostensibly respectful, helpful, and kind way, this in fact masks a relation in which black people have the status of children, animals, machines, or raw materials for white people's profit and control. Cora's decision to stare at the museum visitors suggests that the only possibility of escaping this violent control is by confronting white people directly with their own selfish and cruel intentions. Cora retains her inclination to rebel at all times, even if it is with a gesture as small as giving someone the evil eye. At this point, Cora does not believe in white innocence, even in the case of little children.

That evening, Cora goes to see Miss Lucy and asks about the women in number 40. Lucy says that the women have been moved to another town. She encourages Cora to set an example for other women even if she doesn't want to be sterilized right now, saying "you could be a true credit to your race if you put your mind to it." A colleague of Lucy's enters the room, and Lucy mentions that the Fugitive Slave Law means the proctors are legally bound to turn in runaways. She adds that they are not harboring any "murderers," and Cora begins to fear that someone has tracked down her and Caesar. She goes to the men's dormitories to talk to Caesar, but he is still at the factory. She manages to see Sam, who informs her that he's been trying to tell them that Ridgeway is after them. They decide that Cora should go down to the underground railroad platform. Down in the dark, Cora—who is not religious—wonders if she should pray. However, she has never seen praying work for others who try it. She tries to listen to what is happening upstairs and can hear furniture being smashed. She then realizes the house is on fire.

The final moments of Cora's time in the dormitories highlight the fact that she is not safe anywhere. No matter where she goes, what she does, and how much white people (like Miss Lucy) seem to approve of her, her status as a runaway will mean there will always be someone looking for her and hoping to turn her in. Furthermore, even if Cora were legally free—even if she had been born free—she would still have to contend with slave catchers and others attempting to kidnap her in order to profit from her capture and sale into slavery. As the destruction of Sam's house shows, the attack against black people's freedom and all who seek to aid it is brutal, vicious, and heavy-handed, with no regard for justice or nuance.

CHAPTER 5: STEVENS

A man named Aloysius Stevens works night shifts on fellowship at the Anatomy House of the Proctor Medical School in Boston. Someone called Carpenter arrives at midnight along with an associate and offers Stevens a sip of liquor. The narrative zooms out to explain that Carpenter is a grave robber; if caught, he will be hanged, and his body donated to medical research. Carpenter does it, though, because there has been a "body shortage" since the study of anatomy took off. Professional body snatchers sell corpses to medical schools, and Stevens heard a rumor that Carpenter even sold the bodies of his two dead children. Body snatchers tend to be prone to drinking and ruthless behavior, and Carpenter sometimes conducts elaborate stunts that let him sell the same body twice. Eventually, once the body theft game became notorious, snatchers like Carpenter began to stick to taking the bodies of black people, who had no power to fight back. Stevens dislikes racism and, as a poor Irishman, actually feels a certain affinity with black people; however, he knows it is necessary to use their bodies in order to advance medical knowledge.

This short chapter elaborates on the idea that the seemingly positive field of medical science has a very dark side: violence and violation (particularly of black people). The chapter also underlines the notion that black people in America are valued not as human beings but as commodities—objects from which white people can profit. Stevens does not have a particularly racist or negative attitude toward black people, but he nonetheless accepts that their bodies are what will allow him and other medical students to conduct research. This evaluation proves that even seemingly well-intentioned white people are happy to view black people as a means to an end, a necessary sacrifice in the larger project of building medical knowledge (or building the country).

CHAPTER 6: NORTH CAROLINA

This chapter is preceded by another runaway ad, this time for a 21-year-old called Martha. The narrative then returns to Cora, who believes it has been one day since Sam's house collapsed, though she isn't sure. She remains alone, trapped on the underground railroad platform. She tortures herself with thoughts of what has happened to Caesar and Sam and, while sleeping, she has nightmares about a twisted, violent version of her life in South Carolina. Cora is desperately hungry, and she doesn't know when she will eat again. The train is late, and she is too weak to walk to wherever the next station might be. She curses herself for choosing to stay in South Carolina, thinking it was ludicrous to assume they would be safe there, still in the South and so close to Randall. It is completely dark, but Cora cannot stop having visions of Caesar being captured. She hopes that he was taken with Meg, whom she assumes was his lover, so at least he is not alone. Cora feels like "a stray in every sense… the last of her tribe."

For the second time, Cora has narrowly evaded capture; however, whereas before she was left with Caesar, she is now completely alone. The image of Cora trapped in the dark on the platform beneath the burned house evokes the symbol of the Phoenix, a mythical bird who rises from the ashes of death. It also emphasizes the connection between death and freedom—Cora doesn't know when or if the train will come, and for now she is in a death-like state of deprivation and nothingness. Perhaps more torturous than her immediate surroundings, however, is the mystery of what happened to Sam and Caesar. As with Mabel and Lovey, their fate remains a mystery, although Cora knows the likelihood of them surviving is impossibly slim.

The train speeds into the station, and at first flies past Cora. She screams after it and the conductor stops and backs up. The engineer offers her his sandwich and she gobbles it without realizing he was joking. He is only about 15 and is astonished by Cora's story. He informs Cora that he has been told to avoid Georgia station because it has been discovered by patrollers. He tells Cora she must ride in the flatcar, where she must hold on to straps and ropes in order to avoid flying off. As they speed along, Cora realizes she has forgotten to ask where they are going.

The fact that the train almost misses her, in combination with the news that the Georgia station has been discovered, further highlights how narrowly Cora has managed to get this far in her journey. Because of this, Cora has become more ruthless about her mission to survive, not stopping to consider whether it would be impolite to take the engineer's sandwich.

When they eventually reach the next station, there are still empty cases of explosive powder lying around from where the rock was blasted away. The engineer tells Cora they are in North Carolina, explaining that in the past it was "a popular stop" but it isn't anymore. He tells her he doesn't know who the station agent is. Cora asks to go with him, but he tells her he is too young to be in charge of people and thus is only allowed to take care of the trains. He leaves her and Cora wanders around, only to find that she is completely trapped again. She cries herself to sleep until the station agent, Martin Wells, wakes her. He tells Cora that she is not supposed to be there and that it is "regrettable" that she is. Martin had been visiting the platform to inform the railroad that he couldn't accept any more runaways because of changes to the law in North Carolina. He helps Cora to get into the back of his cart, where she hides under a piece of tarpaulin as before.

Cora's luck appears to be wearing thin. Although neither the engineer nor Martin Wells are unkind, they are both hesitant to offer the assistance Cora requests. This reluctance highlights the tricky balance that operators of the underground railroad must maintain. Despite the fact that everything they are doing is illegal, agents of the underground railroad must still stick to an internally coherent set of rules, or else they risk the whole operation collapsing altogether. While individual agents may be tempted to bend the rules in order to help one individual, this risks sacrificing the chances of many more runaways—not to mention jeopardizing the agents themselves.

Martin lifts the tarpaulin and tells Cora that he wants her to see something. It is a long line of rotting corpses that have been mutilated and hanged. Martin explains, "They call this road the Freedom Trail now." The next time they stop, it is at Martin's house. On seeing Cora, Martin's wife, Ethel, tells Martin that he's going to get them killed. After washing, Cora is ushered up to the attic, which is cramped and hot. Ethel brings Cora food, water, and a chamber pot, and tells her that she must be absolutely quiet. If the servant, Fiona, or any visitors discover Cora's presence, they will all be murdered. Through a tiny crack in the wall, Cora watches the citizens of the town going about their days. There is a dog that is often fed leftover scraps; in her head, Cora names him Mayor. Martin owns a store, and neither he nor Ethel visit Cora during the day while Fiona is working. Fiona is young and has a strong Irish accent. The Wells' daughter comes to visit with her family, and from her voice Cora decides she is kind, like Martin.

Cora's existence in North Carolina mirrors one of the most famous runaway stories in history: The Diary of Anne Frank. Stuck in the attic, Cora must rely on her own imagination to entertain her as she stares out at the townspeople below. The dynamic between Martin and his wife, Ethel, reveals that disagreements over the obligation to fight slavery were hardly as simple as a north/south divide—they cut between individual families and couples. Ethel helps Cora reluctantly, and it seems possible she only does so because if she were to inform the authorities she would likely be killed as an accomplice. Perversely, Ethel is thus pressured into doing the right thing due to her own selfish reasoning.

In the evenings, people gather to have picnics in the town square. Unlike on Randall or in South Carolina, everyone in this North Carolina town is white. The only black people around are hanging at the end of a rope. A banner is unfurled to reveal the words "Friday Festival." There is music, a short speech by Judge Tennyson, and a minstrel show. There is then a play about an enslaved man who runs away and is captured. When the man is brought back, he begs to be given his old "position," but the master explains that North Carolina is different now and the slave is dragged away by patrollers. Next, a real patroller, Jamison, takes to the stage and introduces a young new recruit called Richard, who has already caught a runaway. The girl in question, Louisa, is brought to the stage—she is trembling, covered in blood and dirt, and her head has been shaved. Jamison proclaims that the night riders keep the town safe from black people who will use the darkness of night to do them harm. The patrollers take Louisa to the big oak tree and tie the noose around her neck. A woman in a pink polka-dot dress rushes at the chance to push the ramp away beneath Louisa's feet.

The beginning of this passage is rather idyllic, with the image of townspeople happily gathering together on the lawn to enjoy a picnic and evening festivities. However, things immediately turn sinister when Cora realizes there are no black people around—at least, none who are still alive. This realization highlights the idea that white happiness in America is built on the exploitation, suffering, and death of black people. This idea is then further confirmed by the evening's entertainment, which takes the form of ridiculing black people and emphasizing the hierarchy of white supremacy. The townspeople's treatment of Louisa displays the full, horrifying extent of their cruelty and ominously foreshadows what could happen to Cora if she is discovered.

As the cotton trade boomed, more and more Africans were kidnapped and brought to America, such that in some states (such as Louisiana and Georgia) the number of black and white people became roughly equal. This ratio has made many white people terrified of rebellion. During the Southampton Rebellion, Nat Turner and his crew killed 65 white people before militias and patrollers lynched three times that number of black people in revenge. One night, Martin visits Cora, speaking to her in a whisper because his neighbor's son is a night rider. Patrollers are entitled to stop any black person, and the patrollers will beat them and take them to jail (or worse) if they are an enslaved person without a pass. The patrollers also terrify freemen, destroying their possessions and raping them. Cora tells Martin that black people "know, but don't say" that they make up a significant proportion of the population.

This passage highlights the backwards logic of white supremacy—although white people do everything in their power to maintain absolute control over black people, they remain terrified by the possibility of rebellion. In this way, the relationship between white people and black people becomes an ever-increasing cycle of violence and fear. Facing brutality, black people rebel, and white people meet this with further brutality, which in turn makes black people even more desperate to resist. The result is a climate of seemingly unending violence that will, of course, eventually collapse.

The previous year, local men in North Carolina had gathered to decide what to do about this population question at a meeting called the "Justice Convention." Jamison, who is a senator, was in attendance. The men decided to encourage white people to come to North Carolina to pick cotton; Cora remarks that she has never seen a white person pick cotton before, and Martin replies that, until he moved to North Carolina, he'd never seen "a mob rip a man limb from limb." North Carolina essentially abolished slavery by abolishing black people. When Cora asks where the black people went, Martin replies, "you saw." The government bought enslaved people from farmers and sold them in other slave-owning states. Black people were flat-out banned from North Carolina, and anyone caught in the state was lynched and hung up on the "Freedom Trail."

This is not an entirely accurate account of slavery in North Carolina, but rather a symbolic representation of the deeply unjust history of black people in America. To begin with, Africans were kidnapped and brought to America against their will. Once there, they were forced to work in bondage until their deaths, unwelcome on the land to which they'd been brought except as tools for profit. When slavery was finally abolished, the formerly enslaved faced persecution by white people who immediately wanted black people gone, paying no regard to the fact that it was whites who brought black people to America in the first place.

All towns in North Carolina hold a Friday Festival. Whites found guilty of assisting black people are hanged, but their bodies are not added to the Freedom Trail. The punishment for even possessing abolitionist literature is technically jail time, although in reality it is often death. When it seems that too few white people are being arrested, towns increase the rewards given to those who turn in their friends, relatives, and neighbors. Patrollers have the right to conduct random inspections on any person's home, and Martin's house was searched twice before Cora arrived. Martin apologizes for Ethel's behavior, telling Cora that it is not her fault—however, Cora responds by pointing out that the enslaved are certainly not responsible for *their* predicament.

Having survived to this point in her journey and witnessed so many atrocities, Cora has little patience or forgiveness for Ethel and other white people who are resistant to helping runaways. It is easy to make excuses for white people who face terrifying consequences if they choose to assist the enslaved—yet could it really ever be morally acceptable for a white person to be complicit with slavery? For Cora, the answer is a certain no.

The heat in the attic is sometimes so intense that Cora loses consciousness. She grows thin from lack of food and suffers from violent nightmares. At first Cora asks Martin regularly if there is any news from the underground railroad, but after a few months she stops asking. Cora complains that Martin is holding her hostage, but he insists that if she leaves they will all certainly be killed. During the days, Cora listens to Fiona cursing while Martin and Ethel are out. Cora is curious about the Irish community from which Fiona comes, wondering how they feel about doing "nigger work" in the cotton fields. Cora spends much of her time imagining either the "ornate hell" that Terrance will engineer if she is captured and brought to him, or else the life she will lead if she finally manages to escape to the north. She envisions living in a pleasant house with her husband and two children, a boy and a girl. She imagines Mabel as an old beggar woman to whom she unthinkingly flings a few coins, and she imagines sharing memories of miraculous escape with Caesar. Cora feels no guilt about the white boy she killed. She thinks to herself that fear motivates white people "even more than cotton money" and concludes that "the whites were right to be afraid." She cheers herself by thinking of her rebellion, before remembering the attic walls—and the entire country—that keep her prisoner.

Cora's time in the attic is a kind of purgatory in which she must spend every day wondering whether she will be sent to hell (Randall) or to heaven (freedom in the north). Spending most of her time alone, Cora tortures herself with visions of both scenarios, thereby filling herself with fear over the idea of being caught and frustration over her desire to be free. Cora's isolation in the attic also further emphasizes her isolation in a more general sense. Mabel, Lovey, and Caesar are all gone, and Cora may never learn their fates. Meanwhile, the only person who behaves kindly to her is Martin—Ethel is hostile, and if Fiona merely learns of Cora's presence it is certain that the entire household will be murdered. Indeed, the town lying beyond Cora's claustrophobic attic confirms her isolation even further. She is trapped, surrounded by fatal danger on every side.

A week before the summer solstice, there are a series of "bad omens." First, Cora accidentally knocks over her chamber pot, and the only reason why Fiona doesn't notice is because a friend of hers happens to be visiting. Martin and Ethel fight constantly, and Cora reasons that the only reason Ethel hasn't turned her in is because Ethel herself would be punished for her complicity. Growing up, Martin never heard his father, Donald, express an opinion about slavery, although their family was unusual for not owning slaves. After Donald's death, Martin discovered a map to buried "treasure"—the underground railroad. It turned out that throughout Martin's childhood, Donald had been working for the underground railroad and going on secret abolitionist missions disguised as business trips. Before his death, Donald successfully conveyed 12 runaways to freedom.

Martin's story highlights the fact that people can be drawn to working for the underground railroad in different ways, and for different reasons. Some, like Ethel, are conscripted against their will, and are essentially forced to remain loyal to the railroad in order to keep themselves safe. Martin inherits his position as a station agent from his father, just as Cora inherited her connection to freedom from Mabel. However, there are hints that this inheritance can prove dangerous; while Donald was a skilled and inconspicuous agent, Martin struggles with the role he has assumed.

Cora watches the townspeople who linger in the park after dark because they are "too afraid to go home." Suddenly, she notices that the night riders are on the prowl. Cora huddles in the corner of the attic when the riders arrive at Martin's house. She listens to the riders speak politely with Martin and Ethel before asking to go upstairs. Martin tells them they don't go up themselves much as the raccoons have made a nest, and the night riders leave. The final bad omen is the lynching of a white couple whose daughter betrayed the fact that they were hiding two black boys in their house. The little boys' bodies are strung up on the Freedom Trail. When Ethel is told about this, she faints. That night, Cora goes to bed and reflects on the strange meaning of freedom. Is she free now, confined to a tiny attic? Or was she more free on Randall, where she had space to walk around (yet was under the control of a master)? She thinks about Martin and Ethel, who are imprisoned by their own fear. She recalls her garden on Randall, which she now considers a "joke," and she thinks of the Declaration of Independence, which she can hardly believe is real.

The three "bad omens" have left Cora with a sense of profound disillusionment about her current situation, as well as about the entirety of her life before this point and even the foundations of America itself. All around her, there are signs that white people—even little children—are cowardly at best, and fundamentally cruel at worst. What hope can there be for freedom and happiness in a country controlled by such people? Cora's despair is made clear by the fact that she now considers her garden at Randall—a symbol of endurance and possibility—to be a "joke." She resents any symbol of false optimism, including the Declaration of Independence, which she sees as being so at odds with the reality of America that it's hard to believe it is real.

That night Cora becomes very ill and violently throws up. Ethel cares for her, adopting a newly gentle attitude. Martin and Ethel tell Fiona not to come to work for a few days, knowing that Cora is too ill to hide properly. They pretend that Martin has the Venezuelan Pox and must be quarantined. Cora, delirious, dreams that Ethel kisses her forehead, and she awakens to Ethel reading scripture aloud to her. Cora tells her this isn't necessary, but Ethel insists. Cora has been reading the Bible in an effort to improve her literacy skills, and she discusses a passage about slavery with Ethel, remarking that slavery is an abomination when white people are enslaved but apparently not when black people are. After a few days, Cora's health improves and Fiona returns. That night, a Friday, the night riders storm into the house, pushing past Martin and Ethel. They grab Cora by the ankles and throw her down the stairs. Outside, townspeople have gathered, and a redheaded girl who Cora realizes is Fiona exclaims: "I knew they had someone up there!" and says she can't wait to claim her reward.

Perversely, Cora's illness improves her situation at Martin and Ethel's house—by becoming nearer to death, Cora is afforded a taste of freedom (as well as kindness and care from Ethel). Ethel's religiosity and desire to teach Cora about Christianity suggests that she appreciates Cora's presence as long as she can treat Cora like a child, someone who must be "saved" rather than a person with her own autonomous agency. Having spent so long on the run, however, Cora has little patience for Ethel's patronizing attitude, and isn't afraid to confront her about the hypocrisy of Christians who support slavery. Fiona commits her own act of rebellion by turning on her employers, delighted to show off about her knowledge and receive her reward.

Cora looks at Fiona and is astonished by how young she is. Martin says to Fiona, "We treated you nice," and Fiona replies that they have a "queer way" and deserve whatever happens to them. Jamison appears and tells Martin that Donald would be ashamed of him. Ethel calls out that it was all Martin's doing and she didn't know anything. The tall man who grabbed Cora from the attic introduces himself as Ridgeway, and says that under the Fugitive Slave Law he has a right to return Cora to her owner. He tells Cora she doesn't need to be afraid because she's going "home." A 10-year-old black boy (Homer) drives a wagon up, a sight Cora finds bizarre and "fantastical." Fiona remarks that in order to get ahead in America, "a girl's got to look after her interests." Ridgeway's associate fastens Cora's ankles in chains; she watches as Martin and Ethel are tied to a tree. The townspeople begin to throw stones at Ethel, laughing at her screams. The crowd closes in.

The brutal end to Cora's time in North Carolina highlights disturbing realities beneath the fantasy of American history. Neither Fiona, Jamison, or any of the townspeople show any mercy for Martin and Ethel, and even delight in their misery by laughing at Ethel's screams. Ridgeway, meanwhile, sadistically tells Cora not to worry because she is going "home," knowing full well that what awaits Cora back at Randal is torture and death. The sight of Homer driving the wagon adds a surreal element to the whole situation, somehow making the scene feel even more horrifying. As Cora is driven away, she is alone, her allies once again left dead in her wake.

CHAPTER 7: ETHEL

Ethel always dreamed of being a missionary in Africa, "bringing the savages to the light." She fantasizes about adventuring deep into the jungle and being revered by the Africans she finds there. At 8 years old, she plays missionary with her best friend, a black girl called Jasmine who is "like a sister to her." The girls then move on to play husband and wife, kissing and quarrelling with one another. Jasmine and her mother Felice live in Ethel's house. On Ethel's eighth birthday, her father, Edgar, bans her from playing with Jasmine "so as not to pervert the natural state of relations between the races." After Felice dies, Edgar rapes Jasmine at night; when Ethel asks what he is doing, he simply replies that he is "going upstairs." Eventually, Ethel's mother sells Jasmine, and the family buy an elderly woman to replace her.

Like almost every white character in the novel, Ethel is deeply racist, although her racism takes a new and different form than we have previously seen. She has a patronizing and possessive attachment to black people that began in childhood through her friendship with Jasmine. This attachment is also related to her sexuality. The narrator implies that Ethel's intense feelings about Jasmine and their games of husband and wife, are—at least for Ethel—rooted in lesbian feeling. This detail emphasizes the perverse intimacy that exists between white people and black people during slavery.

By the time Ethel marries Martin, she has lost hope in happiness. She has little interest in men and hates sex, but is grateful for the birth of her daughter. When the family moves to North Carolina from Virginia, Ethel is horrified by the public lynchings; though she is not morally opposed to them, she finds them disturbing. She was similarly not concerned by slavery as a "moral issue," and would argue with Martin at length about the underground railroad. Ethel feels that everything she wants has always been "denied" to her, from living her purpose as a missionary to loving people "the way she wanted." When Cora gets sick, Ethel feels she can finally live out the dreams that have been denied. She reads Cora scripture, bathes her, and kisses her, content at last.

Ethel's outlook on life is fundamentally selfish. Being an outsider herself doesn't encourage Ethel to empathize with other people. Instead, her life experiences—from her friendship with Jasmine to her marriage to an abolitionist—lead her to be resentful of the fact that she personally has been cheated out of happiness and fulfillment. When Cora arrives, Ethel feels hostile to her until she realizes that she can use Cora to live out her fantasies (both in a romantic and moral/religious sense). Ethel does not actually care for Cora, but is pleased by the opportunity to "possess" her.

CHAPTER 8: TENNESSEE

This chapter begins with another runaway ad, a 16-year-old biracial girl called Peggy. The narrator then describes Cora's journey with Ridgeway, during which another captured slave, Jasper, won't stop singing. Jasper does not have a nice singing voice, his features are crooked, and—like Cora—he is unlucky. People stare at the group of them: Cora and Jasper, Ridgeway, his accomplice Boseman (with the necklace of shriveled ears), and 10-year-old Homer. Although Homer is so young, he has the mannerisms of an "elderly house slave." He doesn't seem to feel any sense of connection to Cora and Jasper, the only other black people present. As well as driving the wagon, Homer is Ridgeway's book-keeper. One night, Ridgeway tells Cora that he has never owned a slave apart from 14 hours between the moment he purchased Homer for $5 and 14 hours later, when he signed Homer's emancipation papers. Ridgeway has taught Homer to read and write, and Cora asks why Homer doesn't leave. Ridgeway explains that Homer has seen enough of America to know this wouldn't be a good idea, even if he is technically free. At night, Homer voluntarily handcuffs himself to the wagon and "snores like a rich old man."

The three black people traveling with Ridgeway's crew—Cora, Jasper, and Homer—behave in remarkably different ways, each of which can be interpreted as a different reaction to the brutality and trauma of life as a black person under slavery. Cora remains lucid and rebellious, questioning Ridgeway and pointing out the logical flaws in his answers. Jasper seems to have reached a point of total mental incapacitation, singing relentlessly even though it leads to physical punishments from Ridgeway. Homer's manner of being, however, is the strangest of all. Legally free, Homer chooses to stay with Ridgeway, witnessing the horrors of life on the road with a slave catcher and even voluntarily shackling himself at night. While it may seem like Homer wants to be enslaved, in reality the trauma of his life has likely given him a form of Stockholm Syndrome.

Boseman has been riding with Ridgeway for three years; their crew used to be bigger, but the other men gradually left. Cora encourages Boseman and Ridgeway to tell stories, as this gives her "time to consider her options." Ridgeway explains that they are on what was once Cherokee land, and he tells Cora about the Trail of Tears. Ridgeway feels no sympathy for Native Americans, who he argues should have learned to understand that white settlers would never stick to their treaties. They enter Tennessee, the first time Cora has crossed state lines without the help of the underground railroad. They pass through a town that has been destroyed by fire and see poor white families camping out in tents. Boseman suggests that the townspeople must have angered God, but Ridgeway replies that it was probably just a "spark that got away." Cora has learned to walk wearing irons, her feet covered in sores. She attempts to run away once while Ridgeway and Boseman are urinating, but she is caught and whipped by Ridgeway.

It is striking that—unlike many of the white people Cora encounters (particularly those in South Carolina)—Ridgeway presents a rather honest and accurate view of American history. He openly proclaims that they are on Cherokee land and tells Cora of the brutal and unjust ways in which white settlers came to seize that land from its indigenous inhabitants. Clearly, Ridgeway subscribes to a harsh, nihilistic view of the world that states that whoever has the most power and wealth deserves to exploit, deprive, and even kill others. While the way Ridgeway presents this view makes it seem unusually sadistic and cruel, some would argue that he is simply following the principles on which America was founded.

Having learnt to orient herself by the sun from Caesar, Cora notices that they are heading west, not south. She asks Ridgeway where they are going, and he explains that he has orders to find a runaway called Nelson who fled Georgia and is now living openly as a trapper in Missouri, thereby making a fool of his master. Ridgeway adds that once they catch Nelson, Cora will be returned to Randall. Ridgeway clearly dislikes Terrance, and tells Cora that he killed Lovey by hanging her from a metal hook through her ribs. Cora attempts to stifle a scream, but fails. She lies on the ground for 10 minutes while various townspeople simply step over her on their way elsewhere. Ridgeway thinks it is little wonder the enslaved people on Randall are so miserable, given the cruelty of their master. Ridgeway reflects that money has had a corrupting influence on Terrance, and that he would have liked to have slapped him. Ridgeway goes on to tell Cora that it took days for Lovey to die, and that Fletcher was discovered too. He asks Cora if it was Fletcher who helped Mabel get to freedom, but Cora doesn't reply. She attempts to ask Jasper about his life, but he only sings in response.

In this passage, many of Cora's fears and fantasies are bludgeoned by Ridgeway's honesty. Although Cora knew it was highly unlikely Fletcher would survive and almost impossible that Lovey would, she still harbored hope as a way of getting through the constant uncertainty, anguish, and fear that has characterized her life on the run. Indeed, this was one of many examples in the novel of enslaved people using hopes and fantasies in order to help them endure their fate. This sense of hope is contrasted with Ridgeway's straightforward, gruff manner as he presents the terrible news to Cora. Clearly, Ridgeway believes that the world is a cruel and terrible place and that there is no use entertaining fantasies about it. However, this is an easy attitude for Ridgeway to take, considering he has power, wealth, and freedom.

Jasper tells Boseman that God will see his sins and judge him accordingly. Without a word, Ridgeway shoots Jasper, and Jasper's blood and bones splatter onto Cora's dress. Ridgeway explains that the reward he would receive for returning Jasper was small enough to make it worth the peace and quiet that would come from shooting him. Homer checks the records and says: "He's right." The wildfire had blazed for miles around, leaving Tennessee looking like a scorched post-apocalyptic land. Boseman imitates Jasper's singing to try to "lighten the mood." They pass a sign warning that a nearby town has been struck with yellow fever, and Boseman remarks that two of his brothers died from the illness, and that it is "a miserable death."

This passage once again highlights the extent to which slavery has totally perverted most of the characters' sense of morality. To Ridgeway, shooting Jasper is not a question of taking a human life, but rather simply a calculation of weighing irritation against profit. Meanwhile, Boseman's comment that yellow fever causes a "miserable death" provokes the question of what counts as miserable in a world defined by seemingly unending sadism, torture, violence, suffering, and death.

Cora reflects on the institution of slavery, how it turns human lives into little more than "breathing capital." Unlike slave traders, who account for slaves based on their financial value, Cora values people in terms of their kindness. At first, Cora believes that the white people of Tennessee have gotten what they deserve for their land theft, genocide, and slavery. However, she then concludes that the fire and the fever outbreak cannot be forms of justice, because Cora has done nothing to deserve her many misfortunes. A man comes over and informs Ridgeway that the town has been cleared of yellow fever, and traffic resumes as normal. It is the largest town that Cora has seen since North Carolina, and the townspeople wear the fine clothes of "settlers, not the settled." Homer gives Cora a dark blue dress, unlocking her chains so she can put it on. Cora remarks that while she is "caught," Homer chooses to stay with Ridgeway; Homer simply looks confused and goes back to his notebook. Cora is also given an uncomfortable pair of wooden shoes, and Ridgeway says that he is taking her for supper.

Throughout the novel, Cora remains not only on a physical journey but also a moral and intellectual one. She seeks to resolve the many unanswerable questions of America and slavery. How is it that such an immense and terrible crime against humanity just goes on without interruption? Why is it that so many good people suffer so terribly, while evil people not only escape unpunished, but continue to prosper and profit from their sins? How is it that a small minority of black people, like Homer, seem to lack any sense of solidarity with other people of their race, and even seem to lack a desire freedom? Many of these questions are impossible to resolve, but Cora continues to persevere anyway.

Cora walks past a freeman, who—rather than looking away when he sees her chains—stares back at her. Ridgeway leads her to a table at a saloon and tells her that the dress suits her. He dramatically notes that she hasn't yet heard about Caesar's fate, before informing her that a mob broke into the jail where Caesar was being held and ripped his body to pieces. Ridgeway refers to Caesar as "it," as he does with all enslaved people. This time, Cora is prepared for such news, and she doesn't give Ridgeway the reaction he craves. When Ridgeway tells her he received a reward for Caesar's capture, she replies: "You scrape like an old darky for that Randall money." They eat lumpy stew, and Cora points out that Ridgeway killed Jasper "in cold blood." Ridgeway asks if Cora feels guilty about killing the 12-year-old boy, and—although Cora now realizes she does feel a kind of guilt—she tells Ridgeway she doesn't. Ridgeway explains the idea of "manifest destiny," which is the theory that it was the destiny of white settlers to seize ownership of American territory.

Denied her freedom, Cora rebels in the only remaining way available to her—by being rude to Ridgeway and refusing to provide him with the responses he desires. Although in another context this might have been fatally dangerous, in her current predicament Cora has little left to lose. In fact, being killed by Ridgeway before being returned to Randall would likely be far preferable to whatever Terrance has in store for her. Furthermore, Cora is able to achieve a form of revenge simply by mocking and thwarting Ridgeway, for example by comparing him to "an old darky." By now, she understands how Ridgeway's mind works, and is able to use this knowledge against him as a way of asserting power over him (even as he maintains absolute power over her).

Cora requests to use the outhouse, and the moment she shuts the door on Ridgeway is intensely pleasurable. However, he continues to talk through the doorway, telling her that he knows Mabel must be up in Canada laughing at him and that he takes this as a "personal injury." He bought Cora the dress so as to imagine Mabel "wrapped up like a present" to be delivered back to Randall. He tells Cora that she and Mabel are "the best of your race," which is why slave owners and slave catchers must make sure to suppress such individuals. Every enslaved person who successfully runs away creates hope that the system can be undone, and this is why Ridgeway is so committed to his work. Cora can hear music coming from the saloon, and she imagines patrons dancing slowly together. She thinks that such dancing is "real conversation," unlike Ridgeway's spew of words. Back at the wagon, Boseman admits that he went to a brothel but was too paranoid by his suspicion that the women there were sick with yellow fever.

The image of Ridgeway continuing to explain his theories about race and slavery through the doorway of the outhouse is comic, even if it is also disturbing. While Ridgeway enjoys behaving in a totally powerful and self-assured manner, if this were really the case, why would he feel the need to present this monologue to Cora? Like Ethel, Ridgeway delights in the opportunity to treat enslaved people as his possessions. Whereas Ethel wanted a "savage" with whom she could enact her religious and romantic fantasies, Ridgeway desires an audience for his ideas about the world. His resentment of Mabel seems to be rooted in the fact that he was never able to execute his performance of power in front of her.

Later, Boseman sneaks over to Cora, putting a hand over her mouth. Cora has been preparing for this moment, and Boseman is very drunk. If he unshackles her, she will run. However, moments later Ridgeway knocks Boseman to the ground, and Cora is too shocked to move. Before long, another voice emerges. It is the freeman who Cora saw in town earlier; he is holding a gun and is accompanied by two other black men who are also armed. Ridgeway tells them they are "lost," but the men respond that they are lost only in that they don't like Tennessee and would rather be home. The men already know Ridgeway's name. Suddenly Homer throws a lantern, which causes a scuffle. Boseman is shot, and Cora strangles Ridgeway with her chains. The men ask Cora what to do with Homer, and she isn't sure. They offer to shoot Ridgeway and Boseman, who is bleeding to death anyway, before adding that they'd prefer to put them in chains. Once Ridgeway is in chains, Cora kicks him in the face three times, telling herself it is in honor of three murders: Lovey, Caesar, and Jasper. However, in reality they are all for Cora herself.

Once again, Cora executes a miraculous escape, narrowly escaping death as she seizes freedom. Indeed, Cora's quest for freedom is so closely associated with death that they become two sides of the same goal. Each time Cora survives a near-death experience and once again escapes to freedom, she must again deal with the reality of the people who do not survive the encounter—Lovey, the 12-year-old boy, Fletcher, Caesar, Ethel, Martin, and now Boseman. Cora is haunted by these deaths, but her focus remains on the future lying ahead of her. In the face of so much death, Cora has no choice but to seize the opportunity of freedom and life. This is demonstrated by the fact that she kicks Ridgeway on her own account, rather than as a way of honoring the dead.

CHAPTER 9: CAESAR

The narrative cuts back to Jockey's birthday celebration, when Caesar steals a quiet moment to himself in the schoolhouse. He hopes that this will be the last of Jockey's birthdays he celebrates, the last time he will experience the sad event of enslaved people searching for "tiny pleasures." While the enslaved people on Randall don't know their birthdays (or even, in many cases, their parents), Caesar knows that he was born on August 14th to Lily Jane and Jerome. Caesar thinks about how Cora is able to survive on "the little she called her own," such as her garden. Once, when Caesar was drinking whisky with another enslaved man, he asked about Cora and was warned to stay away from Hob women. The man tells Caesar about Blake's doghouse and adds that Cora has sex with animals. The man is clearly unintelligent, undone by the misery and trauma of life on Randall. Caesar admires Cora's beauty through the schoolhouse window.

This passage serves as a reminder of the fact that Cora was initially suspicious of Caesar's desire to have her accompany his escape, thinking that he thought she was merely a "lucky charm." In reality, Caesar is deeply impressed by Cora. He admires her uniqueness and the way in which she is able to survive life on the plantation. Not only that, but he also finds her beautiful, and seems to feel romantically attracted to her. Caesar's connection to Cora contrasts with the opinion of the other man in the scene, who is suspicious of all Hob women simply for the fact that they are different. Caesar is intelligent enough to realize that this difference can be an asset, rather than a liability.

Caesar feels furious at Mrs. Garner, the "old white bitch" who never fulfilled her promise of freeing him. Caesar's father used to teach him that when he was older, he would be able to do whatever he wanted. However, the truth could not have been more different. Caesar imagines his mother and father being broken by labor on whatever plantation they were taken to. When Caesar approaches Cora, he knows she will say yes even before she does. The fact that Cora shielded Chester during the incident at the dance further proved that she would be essential to Caesar's plan. After Cora was beaten, Caesar visited the schoolhouse for the first time, holding a book Fletcher had given him in his hands. Merely possessing the book could get Caesar killed, but it is a precious reminder of the future, of possibility, and of freedom. He savors the opportunities to read it, and these brief moments sustain him. He tells himself that as long as Cora comes with him when he escapes, he will be able to find his way home.

This passage further explores the notion that rebellion requires a degree of madness. There are several reasons for this, one of which is that the plantation itself is run on principles that—while they may be internally consistent and coherent—stray so far from the boundaries of decency and morality that it is impossible to make real sense of them. The likelihood of failure during an escape attempt is so high that making such an attempt requires a departure from logic, whether deliberate or not. At the same time, for Caesar, Cora, and many other runaways, being tortured and killed in an escape attempt actually becomes the more logical option, compared with a lifetime of enslavement in the hell of the plantation.

CHAPTER 10: INDIANA

This chapter is preceded by a runaway ad for a 28-year-old woman called Sukey, who is "very neat in appearance" and a devout Methodist. The narrative returns to Cora, who is once again in a classroom. This time, the children in the class are racing ahead of her. As part of their lessons, members of the class recite the Declaration of Independence—all except the youngest, who are only 6 and 7. Cora feels embarrassed about being in a class with children; her shame deepens when her teacher, Georgina, scolds her for saying "pickaninnies" instead of "children." Georgina is from Delaware, and at first she and Cora have difficulty making sense of one another. Yet over the four months since Cora's arrival at Valentine, the two women develop a friendship. Cora also becomes close to a 10-year-old girl called Molly, who lets Cora braid her hair and grabs Cora's hand while walking to and from class.

Clearly, Cora's life has undergone a radical change since her time with Ridgeway. The scene portrayed in the opening of this chapter is idyllic; not only is Cora free again, with access to education, but she is surrounded by other black people, lives in the midst of a real community, and has formed close relationships with several of the farm's residents. The fact that Cora's class regularly recites the Declaration of Independence suggests that the residents of Valentine farm are concerned with constructing their own version of America, one true to the country's proclaimed ideals.

One Saturday, the farm residents prepare for an evening feast, and the smell of smoked meat fills the air. Cora shares a cabin with Molly and her mother, Sybil. They are proud of the house and have done their best to make it beautiful. Cora sits in a squeaky rocking chair made by Sybil's lover and picks up her quilting. Sybil is 12 years older than Cora and Cora loves witnessing the love between her and Molly. Sybil had fled a tobacco plantation when Molly was 2 after hearing that the master planned to sell her and thus separate her from Molly. Through sheer luck, she encountered a black farmer who helped her and Molly access the underground railroad. Cora asks Sybil if she's ever met a woman from Georgia who might have called herself Mabel, and Sybil replies she hasn't. Despite Cora's lingering anger with her mother, she asks everyone else on Valentine the same question. Some suggest that Mabel might be in Canada, which is where a lot of runaways go now.

Despite Cora's new, utopian existence, she is still haunted by the unresolved question of what happened to her mother. This issue is made more painful by the fact that Sybil took Molly with her when Molly was only 2—indeed, she ran away precisely to avoid being separated from her child. Regardless of how many years have passed, Cora is still shocked and pained by the fact that Mabel fled without saying goodbye or taking Cora with her. However, she cannot admit this to those around her, even her trusted friends such as Sybil. In the midst of all the unimaginable trauma Cora has been forced to endure, her mother's abandonment is still by far the most painful.

There is no consumption of alcohol on Valentine except for on Saturday nights. John Valentine himself has lost count of how many people live on the farm; there are at least 50 children, most of whom are under 5. Georgina notes that "liberty makes the body fertile," and Cora thinks of the women sterilized against their will in South Carolina. On this night, Valentine is in Chicago while the rest of the farm leaders handle other business, such as attending abolitionist meetings. With the rest of the residents seated and quiet, Gloria Valentine steps up to the lectern to deliver a short speech. John Valentine had bought her freedom years ago and married her within a week. Now, it seems as if she has been to a finishing school for white women. However, she still has trouble ridding her speech of "plantation inflections."

In some ways, Valentine is like an enormous family, but there is also a clear hierarchy of leadership and sense of a collective goal. Cora's classes, the farm leaders' abolitionist work, and Gloria Valentine's effort to speak standard English are all part of the same aim of "racial uplift." Valentine is not only a place of refuge, but also a community dedicated to enhancing opportunities and quality of life for black people. Although overall this is an important goal, it can have the effect of making formerly enslaved people feel shame for their lack of education and plantation mannerisms.

Lately there have been disagreements on Valentine about whether the residents should move west, where there are other communities of black people and where they can be further away from the slave states. A man named Mingo argues that the community should stay put, but should limit its size by kicking out runaways (like Cora). Mingo has an impressive reputation; he raised enough money through extra work to purchase freedom for himself and his family, but Sybil believes that it was simply good fortune that his master would agree to such a thing. Sometimes people John Valentine calls "dignitaries"—wealthy people from the north—visit the farm, but there are none there tonight, only local guests. Sometimes musicians perform, and tonight there is a poet who gives a reading. Someone called Royal appears by Cora's side, distracting her from the poetry. Cora is disturbed by her feelings for Royal, just as she is made anxious by her attachment to Molly.

Cora's life on Valentine may seem idyllic, but she is not able to feel truly comfortable or happy there. Having learned her lesson in South Carolina, she refuses to become too attached to life on Valentine and remains suspicious that something about her turn of good fortune must be too good to be true. This sense of uneasiness is echoed in the broader dilemma of the Valentine farm as a whole. They have established a stable, harmonious, and productive community in Indiana, but they remain in proximity to danger. Is it a greater risk to abandon their current situation and seek safety in the west, or to remain in Indiana?

Just as the dancing begins, Cora heads home, where Royal is waiting for her. He has a black eye but tells Cora it was just a "scuffle," nothing to worry about. He gives her an almanac as a gift, the first book Cora has ever opened new. The narrative jumps back to Cora's first month at Valentine, the motto of which, Cora notes, is "Stay, and contribute." Cora and everyone else on Valentine think of Royal as an "exotic prince." One night, Royal approaches Cora after they hear a speech by Elijah Lander, a highly-educated biracial man who travels the country giving speeches. Cora admits that she is worried about being kicked out of Valentine. The next day, she and Royal go out for a picnic; Cora wears a new dress and bonnet she's recently bought with her wages. After the picnic, Royal shows her the "ghost tunnel," an underground station, and he explains that the tunnel doesn't connect to the main underground railroad line. The last time Cora was at a railroad station, it was the night she escaped from Tennessee, the memory of which still haunts her.

Cora's relationship with Royal is at first introduced without any context, so that the reader is just as intrigued by Royal as Cora is when she first meets him. Insight into Royal's personality comes through a series of contradictory clues: his black eye, the brand-new almanac, the romantic picnic, the underground railroad tunnel. Royal seems to be something of an outsider to the community at Valentine, although he also possesses insider knowledge (such as his awareness of the abandoned underground railroad tunnel). This provokes further questions about Royal's life story. How long has he been at Valentine? What makes him an "exotic prince"? And why does he take such a particular liking to Cora?

Back in Tennessee, after leaving Ridgeway and his crew behind, Royal had introduced himself to Cora; the other men were called Justin and Red. Royal apologetically blindfolds Cora, explaining that it's to keep the location of the railroad station secret. The station they arrive at is decorated in a luxurious fashion. Royal explains that the agent, who is absent, likes to create a "mood." Justin is shocked that Royal just killed Boseman, but Red suggests Boseman surely deserved it. Royal is the first freeborn black person Cora has ever met. He was born in Connecticut to a barber and midwife who had also both been freeborn in New York City. Royal's parents had been optimistic about black people's future in America and were confident that slavery would eventually be abolished in all states. At 18, Royal moved to Manhattan and began working for abolitionist causes, eventually coming to work for the underground railroad.

This passage illustrates the variation in the backgrounds of people who work for the underground railroad, emphasizing that not everyone comes ends up working for black freedom for the same reasons or via the same route. Justin is clearly more sensitive and thus assumedly less accustomed to witnessing violence (or perhaps simply stunned to see a black person inflict violence on a white person). Royal, on the other hand, has the optimism and determination of someone who has lived his entire life as a free man. Meanwhile, it remains a mystery why the station agent chooses to decorate the station in an elegant, expensive fashion.

Royal joined forces with Red after Red's wife and child were lynched in North Carolina. Red walked the Freedom Trail searching for their bodies, but never found them. When Red learns that Cora killed the 12-year-old boy, he comments: "Good." He was the one who encouraged Royal to use a gun; Royal had never held one before and he confesses that internally he was "shaking." Justin was assisted in his escape by a kind employer to whom Justin's master hired him out. When the train arrived, Cora was thrilled to ride in a real passenger carriage, rather than being forced to grip onto a flatcar. Royal told Cora it was up to her whether to stay Valentine or keep riding the railroad through Indiana.

Although Royal, Justin, and Red acted efficiently as a team when they rescued Cora, they are in fact three very different men with dissimilar life stories and relationships to violence and rebellion. Justin is the most timid of the three, with Red the boldest and Royal in the middle. Red's life story further emphasizes the notion that extreme trauma can create courage, as after the gruesome death of his wife and child Red is vengeful against white people and seems to feel that he has little left to lose.

John Valentine passes as white, but black people recognize his Ethiopian features. His father, a white man, didn't acknowledge his existence except by leaving John his Virginia estate in his will. John employed six freemen as farmhands and kept his purchase of Gloria's freedom a secret, as it is common and thus unsuspicious for a white man to "keep" an enslaved woman. When one of John's employees was lynched, he, Gloria, and their children left Virginia for Indiana. The farm in Indiana began with invited guests, and soon became a haven for runaways and a station of the underground railroad. Local businesses soon began to depend on the custom of Valentine residents, which helped ensure the farm's safety within the local community. When Royal showed Cora the railroad station, he explained that he wanted her to know it was there. However, Cora is convinced that she doesn't want to keep running.

This passage provides an explanation of how Valentine farm—which seems almost fantastically idyllic in comparison to the other places depicted in the novel—came to exist and survive. The details about John Valentine highlight the fact that only through clever manipulation of the norms of white supremacy could a community like Valentine end up becoming real. John uses his racial privilege as a white-passing man, as well as his inherited wealth, to construct a safe and productive community for black freemen and runaways. However, there are clues that Valentine might not be as safe and secure as it seems on the surface.

In November, Sam arrives at Valentine, and his reunion with Cora is emotional. Sam tells Cora that Ridgeway found Caesar at the factory before he had a chance to warn him. Despite being horrifically beaten in jail, however, Caesar never gave Sam up—it was another person who told on Sam, leading Ridgeway's gang to burn his house down. Sam fled north and worked as a station agent, at times posing as a slave catcher to help get people to freedom. Cora is thrilled to see Sam happy and healthy, where so many of her other friends have been killed. Sam then tells Cora that Terrance is dead. He had grown obsessed with finding Cora and brutally punished the enslaved people at Randall in his frustration. He died of heart failure in a brothel in New Orleans. Ridgeway, meanwhile, is a laughingstock. Homer rescued him after the confrontation with Royal, and the two ran off together, their reputation in ruins.

Sam's arrival brings an end to many of Cora's fears and fantasies, which in itself is a form of relief. While Cora has tortured herself with all the possibilities of what could have happened to the people she encountered on her journey to freedom, she can now at least accept the truth of what actually happened. Additionally, Sam's health indicates that—although the path to freedom is riddled with violence and death—death is not inevitable. Some people do survive and flourish, and even this small minority makes the pursuit of freedom worth it.

Sam stays on Valentine for three days, unsuccessfully trying to pursue Georgina. On the third night, there is a shucking competition, during which two teams participate while joyful music plays in the background. The night before, Cora let Royal kiss her. She confesses that she's been thinking about Terrance; she knows that the enslaved population will be sold off and worries that a relative will manage to track her down. However, Royal assures her that now that Terrance is dead, she is free. Now Royal joins in with the singing, but Cora struggles to dissociate singing with her memories of working in the fields. When Sam leaves, he promises to write once he has settled somewhere. Cora begins to spend more and more time in the library with Molly, and one day a passerby comments, impressed: "Master said the only thing more dangerous than a nigger with a gun… was a nigger with a book." The community decides to build a bigger library in a separate building next to the smokehouse. In the library, there are books about Africa and slave narratives by black Americans.

Following Sam's visit, Cora is able to finally feel more at peace with her life at Valentine, a shift illustrated by the facts that she spends her time absorbed in the library and lets Royal kiss her. Surprisingly, Terrance's death does not give Cora a feeling of closure—in fact, it's just the opposite, with Cora feeling an ominous tug back to Randall. At least with Terrance alive, Cora could reasonably assume that she knew what was taking place back on the plantation. Now, she is thrown back into uncertainty. The time Cora spends in the library can be interpreted as another way of reassuring herself of reality in the face of uncertainty. In a white supremacist world, true information about black people is a rare and essential gift.

One day, John joins Cora in the library. Cora is ashamed by her debt to him so she usually avoids him. He hasn't been spending much time around the farm, apparently because he has been feeling ill. Cora asks about the meeting at which Elijah Lander will speak. There is a strong culture of debate on Valentine, initiated by conversations between John and scholars and abolitionists who visit the farm. The debate with Lander will focus on the future of the farm; Mingo plans to argue in favor of excluding runaways and trying to improve relations with the local white community. John assures Cora that she is "one of us," but also admits that Valentine is in an extremely dangerous position. White people despise the idea of a black person even knowing how to read, so what would happen if they discovered the library?

John Valentine is committed to an inclusive, egalitarian style of leadership, and thus makes a point of not giving preference to any particular viewpoint or member of the community. However, this is frustrating for Cora, who seeks his reassurance and protection. John speaks proudly of the supposedly healthy culture of debate on the farm, but this viewpoint speaks to the security of his position. For Cora, this debate is not a good thing in itself, as it could mean the end of her time on Valentine and her return to the brutal existence of life on the run.

Cora realizes that she has forgotten how precarious life at Valentine is. She tells John that, the week before, a group of white men yelled vulgar abuse at her and some other Valentine women while they were walking up the road. John notes that while slave catchers don't often come up to Indiana, perhaps it would have been better if he and Gloria kept moving, further away from Virginia and the rest of the South. He says he is proud of the community in Indiana, but he is confident they will be able to rebuild elsewhere. Gloria has expressed interest in going to Oklahoma, and John is eager to make her happy. He tells Cora that he will follow the decision of the community, and that everyone will have a say. Cora asks him why he does what he does, and John replies: "White man ain't going to do it. We have to do it ourselves."

This passage illuminates a different side to John to how he has previously been depicted. In general, John projects a self-assured and positive image to the residents of Valentine. During this private conversation with Cora, however, he admits that he has doubts about whether he and Gloria were right to stay in Indiana. Even more significant is his comment about why he has dedicated his life to running the farm. While John passes as white in public and entertains many white guests, beneath this he is pessimistic and distrustful about the extent to which white people can be relied on for help.

In December, the last ever gathering takes place on Valentine. For years after, the survivors still remain uncertain of what happened. Sybil, who ends up in Michigan among many grandchildren, insists Mingo is to blame. However, another survivor believes that Elijah Lander was the real target, and that the Valentine community was caught in the crossfire. Joan Watson, who was 6 years old at the time and who had been born on Valentine, maintains that the local white people simply joined forces against the farm, as this is just what white people do. The day begins normally; Cora spends it reading the latest almanac Royal has given her. By this point, she has told Royal all about Randall, Ajarry, Mabel, Blake and the doghouse, and the night she was raped. Royal comforted her, saying that everyone who has wronged her will be punished in this world or the next. Cora doesn't believe him, but she still feels better after.

The destruction of Valentine is introduced in a disrupted chronological order; the narrator begins by mentioning the night at which the incident takes place, before jumping forward many years into the future, and then reversing back to the day before the night of the incident. Immediately, the reader knows that Cora's time at Valentine—and Valentine itself—is about to end, but also that there are at least some survivors (and by implication, some fatalities) following the incident. The question of whether or not Cora survives remains unanswered. The survivors' different theories about what happened confirmed the irresolvable mystery surrounding the event.

Sybil tells Cora that Lander has returned to the farm. Sybil admires Lander and is thrilled by his presence, even though she doesn't want to pack up and move west, as Lander is expected to propose. That night, Cora and Royal sit in the front row, next to Mingo and his family. There are no white people there, although there are some visitors from neighboring black farms. John begins his speech by explaining that his white-passing privilege allowed him to grow up without fear of being abused or sold into slavery. He saved his own children from brutality by moving out of Virginia, but "saving two children is not enough." He says that everyone on Valentine, regardless of how long they've been there, has saved his life. He chokes up, and Gloria comforts him. He encourages the residents to listen to the messages of the other speakers. Mingo then speaks, arguing that, although Valentine farm is a great achievement, some black people have been ruined by slavery to a point of no return. These people have lost hope and turned to alcohol and other vices, and are not capable of contributing to a place like Valentine. He also argues that white people won't change overnight, and that Valentine risks ruining the cause of "negro advancement" by harboring runaways and criminals.

The debate about Valentine's future symbolizes broader disputes within African-American communities that have been raging since before the 19th century to the present. In this passage, John and Mingo present two opposing views. Despite his ability to pass as white, John feels a sense of responsibility for helping all black people, regardless of whether they are rich, poor, intelligent, criminal, sick, enslaved, or free. Indeed, John seems to believe he has a special duty as someone with light-skin privilege to use this privilege in order to help the less fortunate. Mingo, however, holds the view that racial uplift depends on intelligent, disciplined, and even-tempered black people separating themselves from those society deems lesser—runaways, drunks, criminals, and so on. Over the years, many have criticized this kind of argument for being self-interested, unjust, and ineffective.

During Mingo's speech, his daughter has been whispering flirtatiously with Lander. As Lander stands to speak, Royal is excited. He wants the community to move to Canada, where he will finally be able to settle down and have a family. Cora tries to ignore this kind of talk. Lander begins his speech by politely disagreeing with Mingo's call for "gradual change." He calls Valentine a "delusion," but a useful one. All of America is in fact a delusion, based on white people's false belief that they have the right to steal land and inflict brutality on others. He says he doesn't know what they should do, particularly given the "we" of the black community encompasses so many different people with such different experiences. However, this makes it all the more essential that black people remain in solidarity with one another. Though the path to freedom is dark and dangerous, if they help each other at least they will "arrive together."

During Lander's speech he articulates many of the thoughts that have been unfolding in Cora's mind over the course of the novel. As Cora travels from place to place and narrowly escapes death each time, it becomes increasingly clear that black freedom is a "delusion" in America, though it's still a delusion worth fighting for. Lander also articulates the struggle to maintain a balance between working in solidarity with one another and looking out for one's own interests, which, to a certain extent, is necessary in order to survive as a black person. Lander's speech ends on a note of optimism, yet this optimism is immediately marred by the events that follow.

Suddenly, the atmosphere turns "prickly," and Lander is shot in the chest. Royal immediately jumps up and runs to Lander, and is shot three times in the back. There are more shots and screams and as the residents rush to get out, white men are waiting outside hollering in glee. The Valentine family escape, and, as Cora holds Royal's head, he smiles and tells her to escape via the underground railroad. As Royal dies, men help Cora up and tell her to run. Everyone is going in a different direction, and many are cut down or dragged off by white men. The Valentines survive, eventually resettling in Oklahoma. Cora calls out for Molly, and at this moment Ridgeway grabs hold of her. He is with Homer, who Cora now realizes was in attendance during the speeches. Homer tells Ridgeway that he heard Royal mention the underground railroad station.

It is tragically fitting that what is perhaps the most optimistic and affirming moment in the novel quickly turns to carnage. Lander and Royal are both killed immediately, highlighting the ease with which people take black lives without even a moment's consideration. Royal's smile and encouraging words to Cora as he dies show that, despite everything, he remains optimistic about her fate. In this way, Royal comes to symbolize everyone who died during Cora's journey to freedom. Perhaps Royal's smile reflects not only his hope for Cora's freedom, but the fact that he, too, is now finding freedom in death.

CHAPTER 11: MABEL

When Mabel was pregnant with Cora, she would apologize to the unborn child for bringing her into the world, just as she apologized to Cora for making her a stray—yet Cora heard none of these apologies. As she escapes, Mabel thinks about Moses, one of the bosses on Randall, who was a weak baby whom everyone expected to die young. However, thanks to Moses' mothers efforts, he survived. Moses didn't become mean when his mother was sold, but rather he became mean after he was promoted to being a boss. He began regularly raping Mabel after threatening to take Cora, who was only 8, instead. Mabel thinks of all the people she has seen die on Randall, both young and old. Cora's face comes into her mind and she stops thinking, forcing herself to just run. Mabel's decision not to die on Randall came suddenly, and soon afterwards she was escaping into the night. Mabel met Cora's father, Grayson, when she was 14. Grayson was "sweet-tempered" and "swaggering." They danced together, and Grayson promised to buy Mabel's freedom. However, he was dead before he learned that Mabel was pregnant.

In this chapter, we finally learn about Mabel as she really was—neither a mystery nor the cruel and heartless person Cora imagines her to be. In fact, Mabel is strikingly similar to her daughter. Both have a powerful strength and an instinct for rebellion against all odds. Ultimately, the brutality and suffering Mabel witnesses on Randall means that she feels she has no choice but to try to escape, even if she dies only a mile away from the plantation. It is this spirit that Cora eventually inherits, and which enables her to endure the most horrific circumstances on her journey to freedom. The description of Grayson suggests that Cora also inherited some of his qualities, such as his kindness and ability to find humor in the midst of the brutality of life.

Mabel trips and falls into the water as she flees, taking this opportunity to eat a turnip from her garden. It is deliciously sweet. Mabel did not inherit Ajarry's "perseverance," but she did get the garden, "the most valuable land in all of Georgia." Mabel listens to the sounds of the swamp, free of screams and the shouts of overseers. She feels peaceful, basking in her freedom. Immediately, however, she resolves to go back for Cora. She feels that she was foolish to attempt an escape, even though the memory of these moments of freedom will be a "treasure" she will keep forever. Maybe there is a chance that Cora will be able to experience such a feeling for herself one day. A snake bites her, and—though Mabel keeps running—she knows there is poison running through her blood. She comes across a soft bed of moss and decides that this is where she will stop and die. The water swallows up her body.

This brief moment of insight into Mabel's life neither confirms Cora's negative view of her nor romanticizes her. It is clear that Mabel has her faults and flaws, and perhaps there is an extent to which she should be blamed for impulsively abandoning Cora. However, this part of the narrative reveals that Mabel did in fact want to go back for Cora. Furthermore, it suggests that Mabel's experience of freedom did somehow enable and prefigure Cora's own flight. While Mabel's experience of freedom is brief and ends in death, it is at least death on her own terms, and a death that ultimately helps Cora to also get free.

CHAPTER 12: THE NORTH

The final chapter of the novel is preceded by a runaway ad for Cora; however, unlike the other ads, this one deviates from the conventional script by announcing: "She has stopped running," and "SHE WAS NEVER PROPERTY." The narrator explains that Cora leads Ridgeway and Homer to the underground railroad station. Back on Valentine, she fought and kicked Ridgeway while the farmhouse and library burned in the background. When Ridgeway points a gun at her, she tells him where the station is. Ridgeway looks ill and disheveled. Thinking about Royal, Cora feels full of regret that she rebuked his advances for so long. Ridgeway again tells Cora she's "going home." On seeing the station, Ridgeway reflects that while most people think the underground railroad is just a "figure of speech," he always knew it was real. Ridgeway unshackles Cora and forces her to dig, while Homer snickers. Eventually, she reaches the trapdoor. Ridgeway is the first "enemy" to see the underground railroad with his own eyes. Cora grabs him and they scuffle until Cora manages to throw him down the stairs, leaving his body mangled.

Cora and Ridgeway's relationship is ultimately depicted as a mythical coupling of a hero and her arch enemy, doomed to be locked into battle until one of them dies. In this sense, Ridgeway symbolizes the entire system of slavery and white supremacy that seeks to deny Cora her freedom at all costs, while Cora symbolizes the spark of black rebellion. Ridgeway has always had a huge advantage over Cora, due to his weapons, his crew of assailants, and the law, but in the end, their struggle becomes a one-on-one battle in which Cora manages to overpower him through cunning and sheer force of will.

As Ridgeway lies in agonizing pain, he calls for Homer and asks him to write something down in his journal. Ridgeway begins to make grandiose statements about "the American imperative," which Homer copies down. Cora, meanwhile, pushes against the handcar pump with all her might, and eventually manages to roll out of the station. She digs the tunnel as she goes, swinging a pickax into the rock. She stops to sleep for a while, and, upon waking, decides to walk the rest of the way. She sleeps twice again, dreaming of Royal and waking up in tears. Eventually, she finds the tunnel's opening and emerges into warmth. She can tell from the sun that she has made it north, although she has no idea where exactly. Cora finds a trail and eventually comes across three wagons. One of the drivers, a redheaded Irishman, stops on seeing her and asks if she needs anything. Cora says no, but on seeing another driver—an old black man—she admits to him that she's very hungry. He gives her some bread and suggests that they catch up. He introduces himself as Ollie, and explains that they are on the way to California. Cora tells him that she is a runaway from Georgia, and wonders what Ollie is running from.

The final passage of the novel is concerned with the mythology of America. The traditional story told of American history is that the country began as a place of refuge for people facing persecution in Europe. However, as Cora's story shows, the underside to this narrative is that America became a place of persecution for black people. Unlike the European settlers, however, black Americans had no place to escape, and thus became permanent runaways in their own land. Cora's journey through the underground railroad tunnel is the climax of her fight for freedom—just as it seems to be impossible, she breaks out into the open air and has the good fortune to meet kind strangers. Although little information is given about Ollie, he and Cora form an instant bond through their shared experience of flight.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Seresin, Indiana. "*The Underground Railroad*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 10 Apr 2017. Web. 18 Oct 2019.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Seresin, Indiana. "*The Underground Railroad*." LitCharts LLC, April 10, 2017. Retrieved October 18, 2019. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-underground-railroad.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Underground Railroad* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Whitehead, Colson. The Underground Railroad. Doubleday. 2016.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Whitehead, Colson. The Underground Railroad. New York: Doubleday. 2016.